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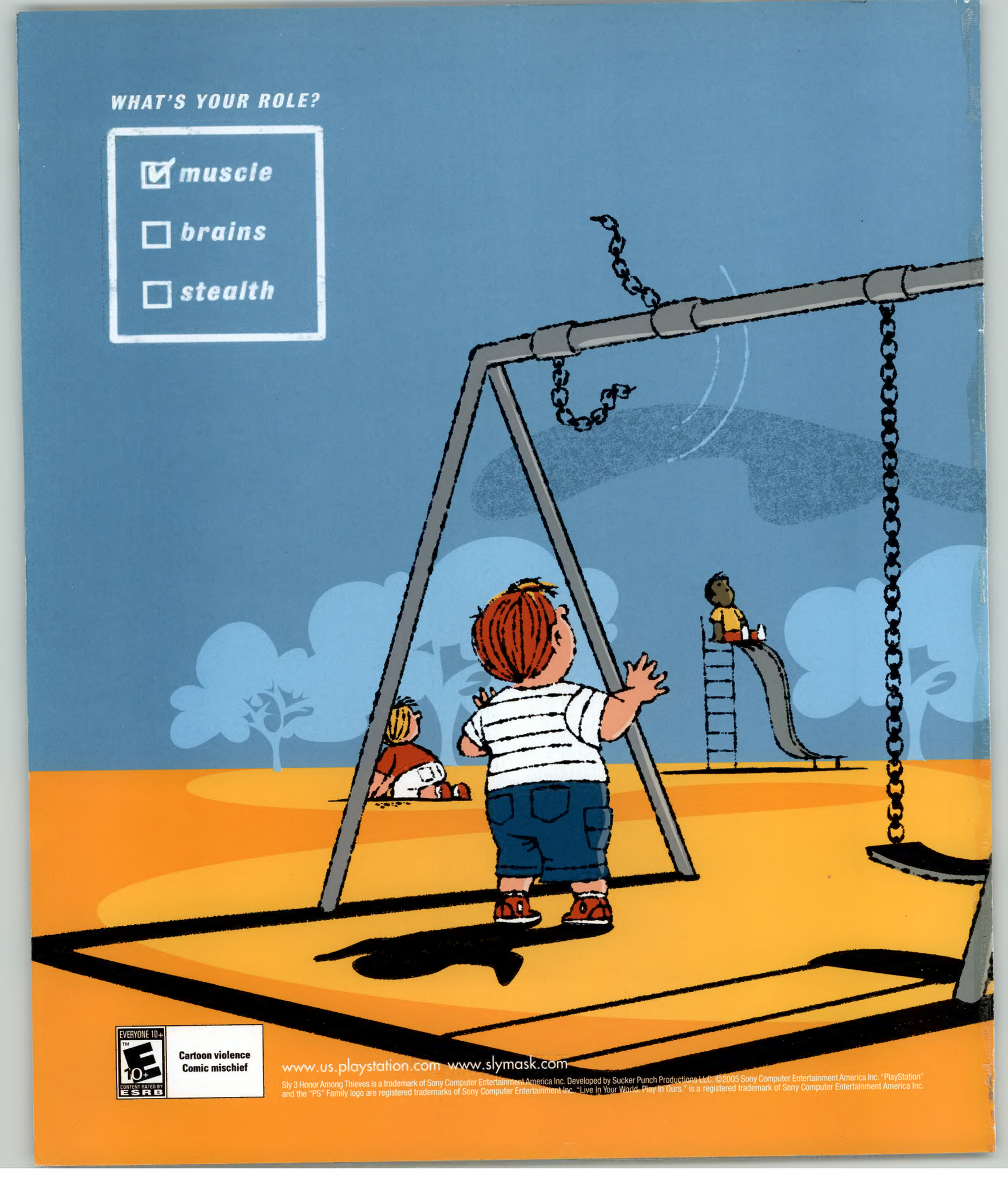


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November 2005 Volume 4 Issue 11



Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

Control

What's the first thing you do when you fire up a new game, once the opening movie finally sets you free? If you're like me you run the character around to see how he, she, or it feels and what the camera is like… whether you can rotate it 360, whether or not it's tethered to the character's backside or free, etc... For me this is the most crucial point in any game because if I'm going to spend 20 or so hours staring at who or whatever, it had better look and feel pretty damn spectacular. So then, being one of the most basic, fundamental, and crucial parts of game creation, why do so many developers get it wrong? Even if a character looks good and has proper physics—which is about 50% of the time—95% of the time the character's feet and legs won't be dynamic to the slopes (and stairs) of the game. Come to a rest on a slope and in go the toes and up go the heels…it's almost as bad as using the same animation routine for running up (or worse, down) stairs that you use for flat surfaces… and then there's turning arcs. When a character turns it should affect the animation with a slight lean, just as when a character changes direction there should be transition. And FPSs aren't off the hook either. Look down in Perfect Dark Zero and…no feet! This is next gen? Whenever I receive one of these broken games where the character animates as if it had a merry-go-round pole shoved vertically through its torso I make it a point to contact whomever will listen, and almost always get the same reaction… "Great point Dave, but we didn't think of it early on and it's too late to implement it now…" Either that or, "Well, it was either incorporate that or spend the resources getting something else in," which to me is a huge cop out. I'm not one to choose sides, but tell that to the publisher whose lead character looks like a pirouetting mannequin because you wanted physics on the chairs. This is the lead character after all. Should there be any choice? Is it really that difficult? I wondered… So I took my query to the top and asked one of the most skilled game creators in the world: Team Ninja's Tomonobu Itagaki, maker of the finest in-game models in the known universe, who chuckled and simply said, "It's 7th grade math," then proceeded to pull out some scratch paper and draw me the calculations… So if it's that easy, and developers are forgetting or neglecting to incorporate it now, won't these same developers keep right on doing it into the next generation of games? This would be most unfortunate. If I'm negotiating stairs via flat sprint animation next year, I'm going to be really disappointed... And I haven't even touched on physics; another aspect of game creation nearly everyone gets wrong. Some characters don't even have walking animation; what the hell is that? If this all sounds like the ramblings of a madman to you here's the top of the scale so you can do your own research: For physics look no further than Maximo (Mr. Dave Siller is one of the true masters of character design and physics); Jak, Oddworld's Stranger, Kratos from God of War, or either Liu Kang or Kung Lao in Shaolin Monks (masterworks of precision control). For slope sensitivity check out Windwaker, Ninja Gaiden, Primal's Jen (champion of the cause and underrated game of the millennium) or Splinter Cell Chaos Theory. Notice a trend here? These are all stunning games. So I know it's not just me…or is it? Is this bug up your butt too?

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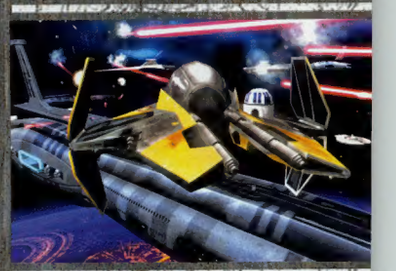
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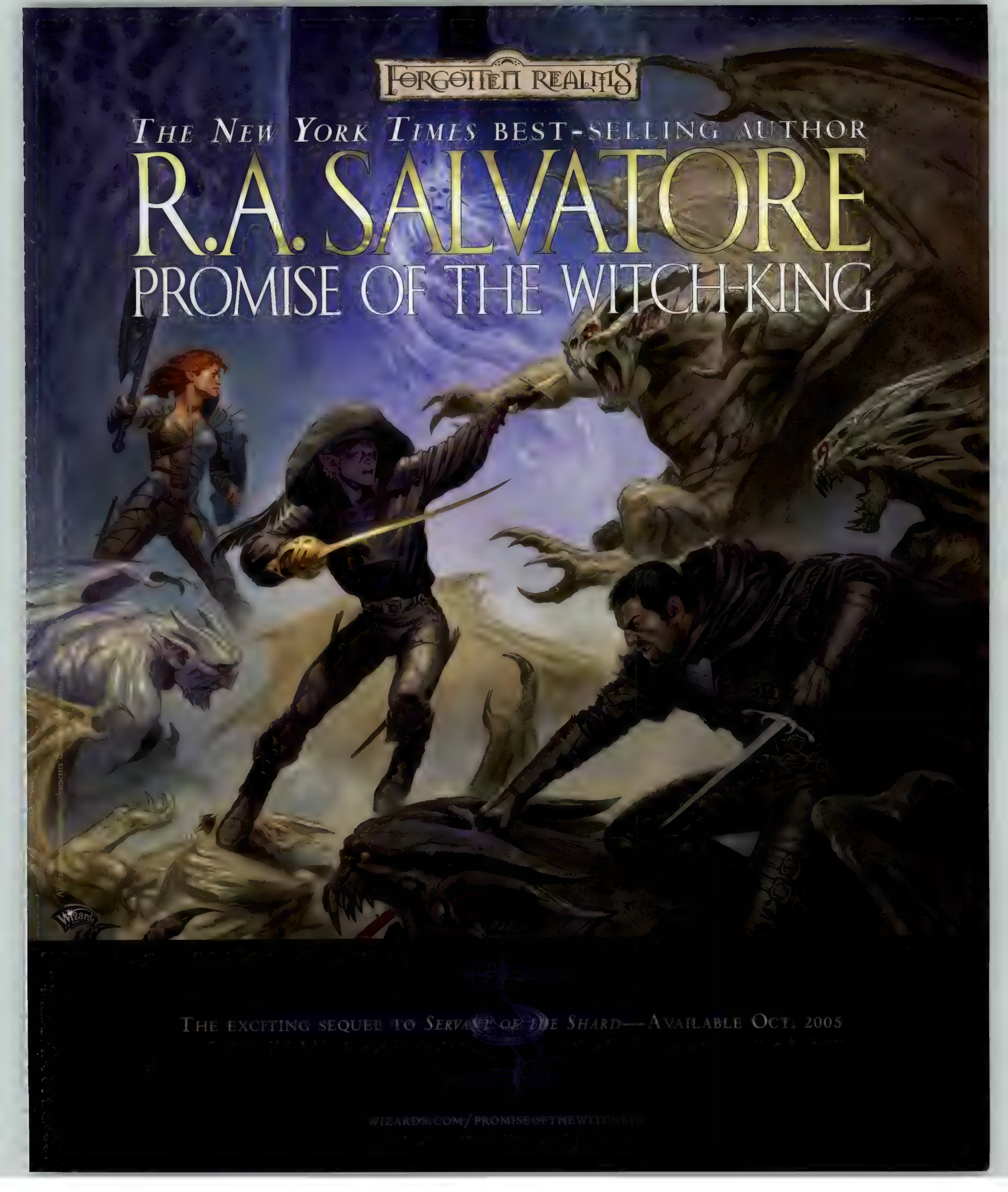
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XBOX 360

playback

November 2005

letters@playmagazine.com



LETTER OF THE MONTH

Message from the front lines

I've been working at EB Games for 11 months now, and since the first of January, we have been informing parents about the purchases of Mature rated games, and I have had the pleasure of turning down little kids because they wanted to buy GTA: San Andreas. I remember one mother I spoke to, because I had to tell her that her child picked out a Mature rated game, and why it was mature rated. She waved it off and said it was fine- so she buys it for her child. A couple days later, she comes back to me demanding her money back because the game was too graphic for her child. Another incident, a 14 year old wanted to buy God of War. When I turned him down, he gave me quite the attitude along with lots of F-bombs and S-bombs, and gave me the finger on his way out. Events like these happen daily for, I'm sure, all the major retailers that enforce this policy. What agitates me the most is that M rated games are becoming the new cigarettes- the more restricted, the more kids want it. I see kids stopping strangers to ask them to buy an M rated game for them, and paying them for it. It's truly sad. I'm 19, and I own no M rated game, and have no interest in them. There are a lot of fantastic Teen rated and rated E games that I enjoy. (Katamari Damacy, YS: Ark of Napishtim, Final Fantasy Series, Soul Calibur 2....to name a few) I feel like we as a Gaming Industry are doing our part preventing kids from buying Mature rated games. Though, it's really the parents' responsibility, and them making an effort to know about the rating system...or at least not ignore me when I am trying to explain the rating system to them.

-Christine

Big 3 bonanza

It seems that each and every week, I find myself in yet another debate as to why Sony gets all the games. In almost all events, those arguing against Sony tend to completely ignore their own responsibility as well as the console makers faults leading towards these events. It's all too easy to blindly point the finger at Sony as "the great ruiner" of the gaming industry. Now keep in mind that I own all three consoles and intend to own all three next gen consoles. It just happens to be on PS2 that majority of the games I play come out on, with free internet play, no less.

So let's take a moment to point out events that lead to this situation since I would personally like to spread my love equally across my platforms. It's just that I don't receive that opportunity. We have three majorly different focuses of three vastly different consoles.

On Nintendo, you have a massively Eastern focus with the assumption that the rest of the world will fall in line with whatever the Japanese studios are creating. This is working fine as a break even point but as we are all seeing, market share is steadily decreasing with each new generation. But the old saying goes "I buy Nintendo consoles for Nintendo games." This is all fine and good but it's also this attitude that is defeating Nintendo. After all, it took Link as a character in Soul Calibur II to make a third party console game on GCN to finally outperform PS2 and Xbox sales. It's the pitiful third party sales that are constantly prompting the unsafe bets to stay on Xbox and PS2 games to stay there. If Nintendo fans truly want more games, they need to spend their money on more than Nintendo games. Otherwise the third parties will pull their support as rapidly as RE4 turned multiplatform.

"What agitates me the most is that M rated games are becoming the new cigarettes..."

Now Microsoft remains a fairly perplexing puzzle because third parties see sales there. Except in Japan and guess where the single most important region exists? Microsoft has done fine focusing on the US and Europian markets but they expected Tecmo to single handedly win Japan. It doesn't work like that. And yet, as they lay out the battle plans for the next generation, it looks like lessons aren't learned easily in XBox land. Yes, they are focusing on getting more important third parties to spearhead the Japanese market and yet.. where is their support? How can Microsoft expect Japan to instantly love the 360 when their entire battle plan consists of hired guns? Since Microsoft is missing the Japanese support for most of this generation, the Japanese developers are barely even looking in their direction which results in less games.

Finally, you have to step back and appreciate the battle plan Sony had long since established. Love it or hate it, they the industry as large as it is today. But what made their plan work so well? After all, what does Sony have that Microsoft and Nintendo doesn't? How about an appreciation for the NEED of multiple region developmental focuses. Not to mention Sony is also the first to even acknowledge the rapidly growing Korean market. Sony makes games in each region targeted for that region. There just happens to be some spillover from region to region. There is no doubt Insomniac is an American developer just as no doubt exist as to Polyphonys native shores. Sony spearheads the assault in each region and developers know they'll get more sales on a Sony console. Before either Microsoft or Nintendo can overtake Sony, they both have to adopt a much more global approach instead of MTV specials and Reggie rants.

David Sheppard

Pissed over PSP

Alright, I'm starting to feel like a real sucker for buying a PSP! It's been around for six months and still only a small handful of decent games have been put out for it, and only one RPG total. Are most hardcore gamers really sufficed with puzzle games and ports? And I can't ever think of a time that I really felt the urge to pull out a handheld player and watch a movie that I could have bought for cheaper on DVD and watched in the comfort of my own home. Not to mention, I can't even make out the screen outside in bright daylight!

I guess Sony didn't want to tell us about the lackluster support of game companies that were probably afraid to chance the cost of developing games for a new GBA competitor. Well it's either time to start releasing some worthwhile games, or watch it go the way of the Atari Lynx, Sega Game Gear, Neo Geo Pocket etc, and let Nintendo put another notch in their belt.

$250 is a hell of a lot for a paperweight!

Mr ScaryTT

Carta query

I'm emailing to ask about the Magna Carta interview. I didn't read much of it yet, but of course I have huge interest in the artist Hyung. In one of the questions though, he says he hasn't published any of his works yet, but the book Oxide 2x, which is in Japanese contains his illustrations from the Magna Carta games, and the War of Genesis games.
So I was wondering, how old was the interview, and where was it originally published?

Thanks!
~Katie Gnus

We did the interview personally just days before (we never repurpose content). Perhaps he was referring to America. We'll see what we can find out.

Super Potato or bust!

Hey, loved the piece on Akihabara game shops in the latest issue -- I just wish the photos were bigger! I think I'm gonna move there -- not just to Tokyo, not just to Akihabara, but to Super Potato. Seriously. I would live right in that frickin' store. And being an arcade collector as well as a console gamer, it sure would be nice if I had access to a place like MAK (although part of the appeal of arcade game collecting, to me anyway, is the fact that you CAN'T just walk into a store and buy an Elevator Action machine or a Vampire Hunter 2 CPS2 board). Anyway, I hear Osaka's Den Den Town is another hotbed of videogame shopping, how about a tour of that area in an upcoming issue?

Thanks!
TJ

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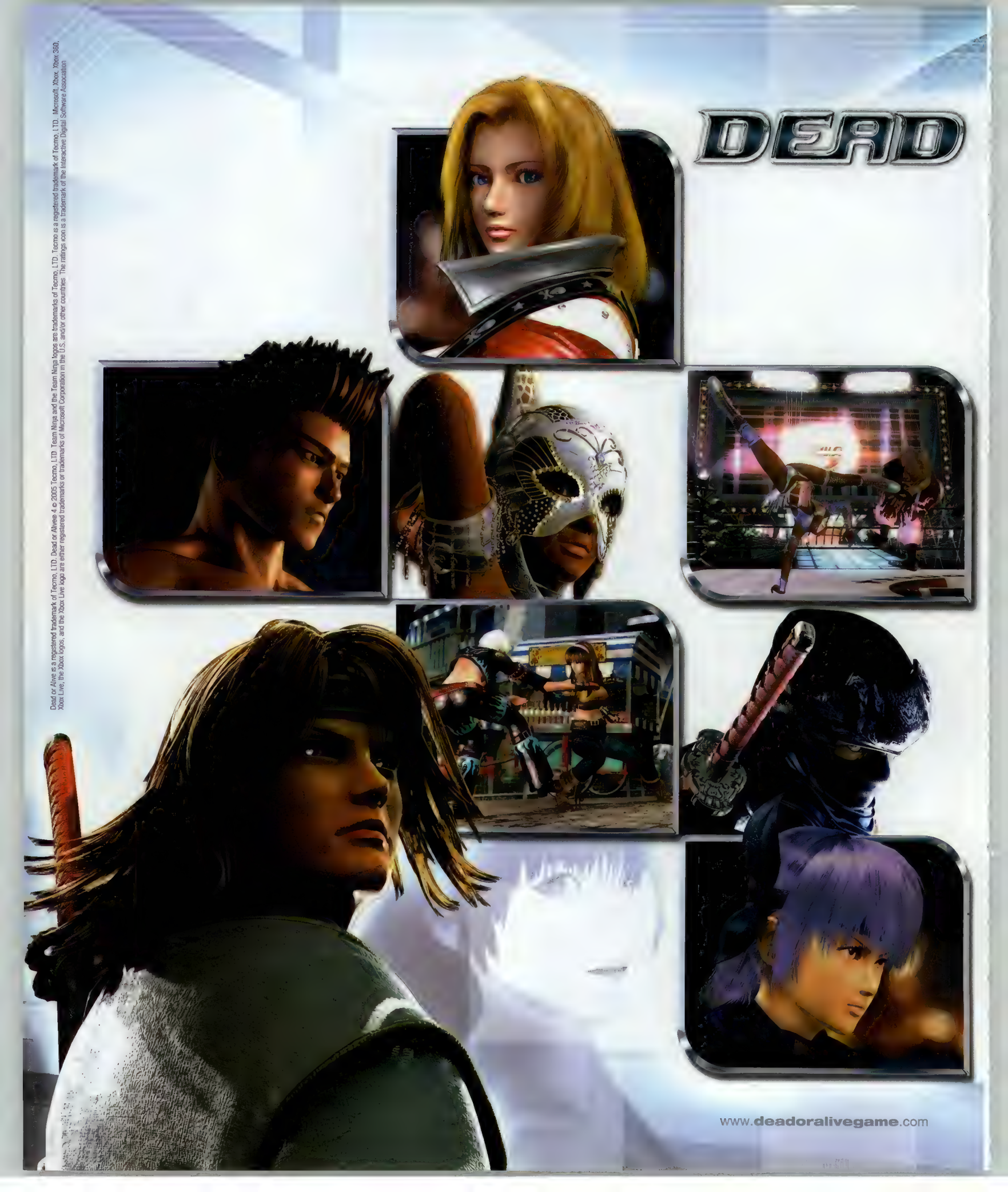
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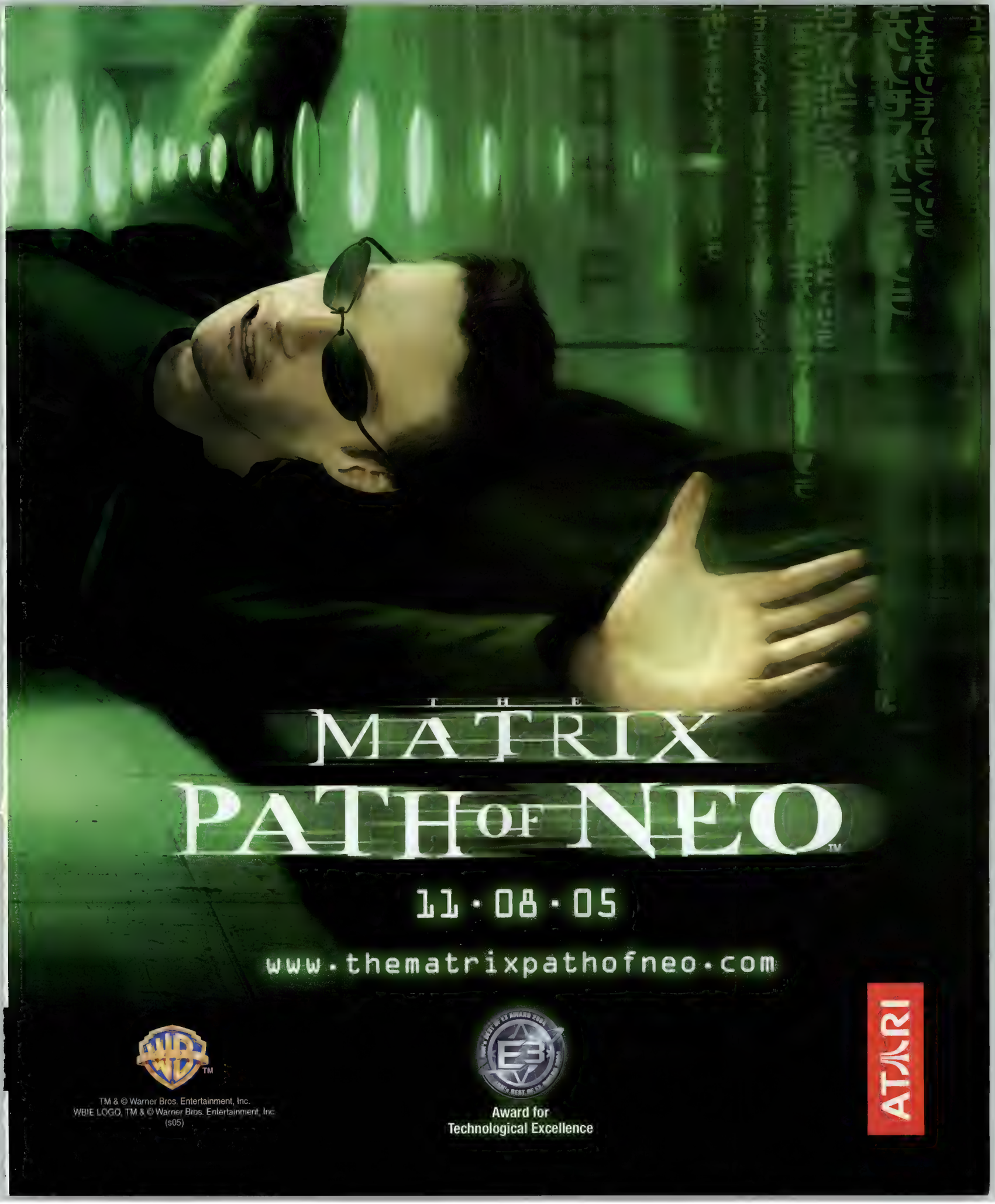
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Adrian Carmack's A Series of Unfortunate Events

id, you've got some 'splaining to do...

The Wall Street Journal recently got their hands on a shocking bit of legal intelligence from 2004. The information, clearly never intended for public consumption, involves a bizarre legal melee between id Software co-founder Adrian Carmack, id, and id's longtime publishing partner, Activision. First off, it looks like Carmack (no relation to id's tech guru, John Carmack) is completely cast off from id. Up to now, PR has been finessing his absence as a well-earned retiring, but it's apparent that Adrian's departure transpired amid a storm of acrimony.

As per the WSJ report, Carmack's split with the House of Doom involved a mutiny of sorts. The accounting of events has id's four other co-owners banding together to unceremoniously boot Carmack's ass out of the fold, following his refusal of a $20 million buyout offer. This is where the ordeal continues to make noise, with Carmack fighting a contract mandate that would have him forcibly selling back his considerable storehouse of shares (41% ownership) for a bargain price of $11 milllion. The intrigue doesn't end there.

Also revealed in the report is Activision's takeover bid of $105 million made last year—not the first large offer summarily refused by id. Adrian Carmack's side of the story contends that fellow id co-owners closed the door on every Activision buyout offer in a deliberate ploy to fire him, so that, based on his contract, Carmack's shares could be re-acquired at a fraction of the cost that Activision would have shelled out for them. Carmack's final months at id were allegedly spent in a shadow of deprivation, his privileges and involvement curbed and censored as never before. No word on whether he was in favor of Activision's takeover offers, but if you've been connecting the dots up to this point...that may in fact be the case.

Yes folks, a lot of cash is at stake in this industry and money makes humans do strange things. We'd like to think that the bottom line is good gameplay, but millions of dollars are changing hands and buttons are being pushed for a different level of control.

Celebrity Gaming News

Jessica Alba



Self-proclaimed gamer Jessica Alba's getting into gamemaking? Apparantly, yeah, and she wants it to be sweet and nonviolent, uniting people on their cell phones in positive ways. It's based on some sort of progressive sport, and the young actress will be featured as a character.

Adam Sandler



Guaranteed to be better than Resident Evil Apocalypse before even going into production, Grandma's Boy isn't actually a movie based on a video game, but a comedy about a 36-year-old game tester who's evicted from his apartment and forced to shack up with grandma and her two geriatric friends. So a movie plotted around gamers and their wacky exploits? Well, who better than Adam Sandler to pull it off... or at least his production company. Check out Adamsandler.com for the details.

The Suffering

MTV Films gives Torque the greenlight

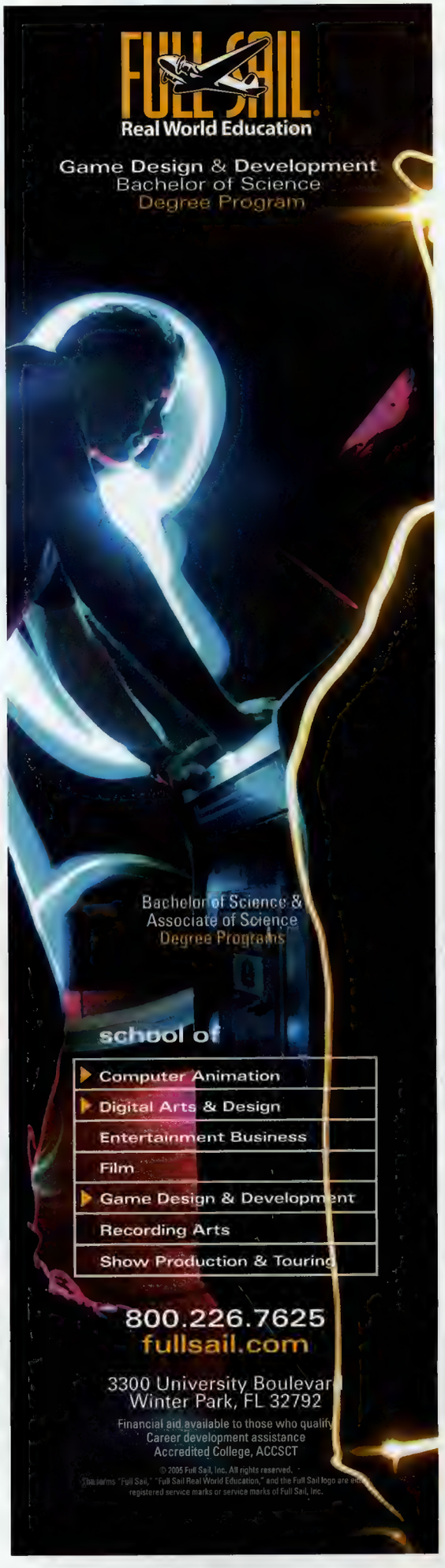
The tortured Torque's making his film debut. MTV Films recently announced the option to take Midway's The Suffering (see review of Ties That Bind, pg. 89) to the big screen. Developed by Surreal Software, the game's adult themes and disturbing depictions of horror are joined by an emphasis on a detailed narrative, following Torque's imprisonment for the murder of his family and subsequent escape into the slums of Baltimore. "We are very excited to be working hand in hand with Midway to translate this innovative game into an edge-of-your-seat film," said David Gale, Executive Vice President, MTV Films. "Gaming is such a huge part of the culture for MTV's audience it makes perfect sense for us to work with Midway, Stan Winston and Circle of Confusion on bringing The Suffering to life as a feature film."



SEGA OPENS CG STUDIO

Gearing up for next-gen

With the next-generation of systems around the corner, the remarkably sophisticated technology will require new modes of development. Outsourcing and effects studios will certainly begin playing more important roles. In an effort to accommodate such forthcoming demands, SEGA has announced the opening of a CG studio in April of 2006, which will be devoted entirely to assets for games and other forms of entertainment. "With the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 expanding the possibilities of how well we can express art on screen, CG will become an even greater element of the gaming experience," said Sega. While in-game cinematics will be part of the focus, actual game assets are planned to come down the pipeline as well. The face of development is on the brink of some interesting new changes...



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PlayStation.2

the CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Half-Life 2** electronic arts / xb
02	**50 Cent: Bulletproof** vu games / ps2, xb
03	**The Warriors** rockstar / ps2, xb
04	**Star Wars Battlefront II** lucasarts / xb, pc
05	**Fifa Soccer 06** ea sports / ps2, xb, x360, gc, pc
06	**From Russia With Love** electronic arts / ps2, xb, gc
07	**The Matrix: Path of Neo** atari / ps2, xb, pc
08	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / ps2, gc
09	**GTA: Liberty City Stories** rockstar / psp
10	**Marc Ecko's Getting Up** atari / ps2, xb, pc



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Aug Game Sales

01	**Madden NFL 06** electronic arts / ps2
02	**Madden NFL 06** electronic arts / xb
03	**NCAA Football 06** electronic arts / ps2
04	**Clancy's Recon 2: Summit Strike** ubisoft / xb
05	**Nintendogs: Dachshund & Friends** nintendo / ds
06	**Pokemon Emerald** nintendo / gba
07	**Madden NFL 06** electronic arts / gc
08	**Star Wars Battlefront** lucasarts / ps2
09	**Nintendogs: Labrador & Friends** nintendo / ds
10	**Halo 2 Map Pack** microsoft / xb



Your Megastore Beckons!



The Matrix: Path of Neo
atari / ps2, xb, pc

If you've ever wanted to be Neo in those super-sweet action sequences throughout the Matrix trilogy, take the red pill.



The Warriors
rockstar / ps2, xb

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Star Wars Battlefront 2 III
lucasarts / ps2, xb, gc, pc

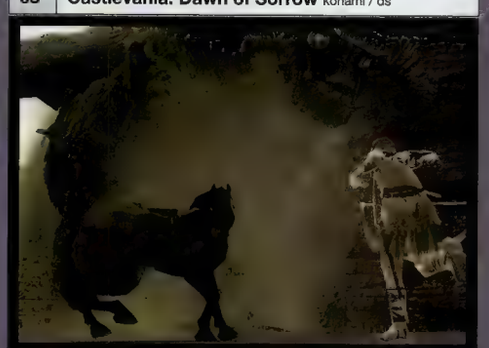
Wonder what the Clone soldiers were thinking while the Emperor plotted to dispatch the Jedi Order? They tell the story through their eyes.

Top 5 Now Playing and Reader Selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Shadow of the Colossus** sony / ps2
02	**Kameo: Elements of Power** microsoft / x360
03	**Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess** nintendo / gc
04	**Half-Life 2** electronic arts / xb
05	**Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow** konami / ds



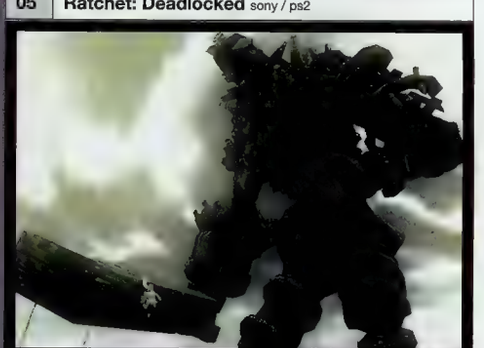
Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Kameo: Elements of Power** microsoft / x360
02	**Dragon Quest VIII** square enix / ps2
03	**Castlevania: Curse of Darkness** konami / xb
04	**Gunstar Super Heroes** sega / ds
05	**Battalion Wars** nintendo / gc



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Shadow of the Colossus** sony / ps2
02	**Jak X** sony / ps2
03	**Far Cry: Instincts** microsoft / xb
04	**Mario and Luigi 2** nintendo / ds
05	**Ratchet: Deadlocked** sony / ps2



Ashley Esqueda senior editor

01	**PoPoLoCrois** agetec inc / psp
02	**Star Wars Battlefront II** lucasarts / xb
03	**Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow** konami / ds
04	**We Love Katamari** namco / ps2
05	**Conker: Live and Reloaded** microsoft / xb

Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow** konami / ds
02	**Mario Superstar Baseball** nintendo / gc
03	**Mario and Luigi 2** nintendo / ds
04	**PoPoLoCrois** agetec inc / psp
05	**Mario Tennis: Power Tour** nintendo / ds

Greg Orlando associate editor

01	**Burnout Revenge** ncsoft / psp
02	**The Warriors** rockstar / xb
03	**Playboy: The Mansion** arush ent & groove games / xb
04	**Advance Wars: Dual Strike** intelligent systems / ds
05	**Mario Superstar Baseball** nintendo / gc

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DRAGON QUEST VII

Journey of the Cursed King

Dave Halverson





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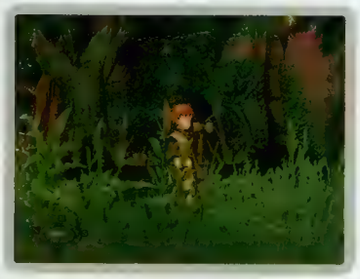
Few pairings in the history of modern pop-culture have created such a National stir as when Enix' Yuji Hori got together with Dragon Ball Z manga artist Akira Toriyama and birthed the Dragon Quest RPG series on Famicom. Dragon Quest (previously known as Dragon Warrior in North America) is so popular in Japan that following the release of Dragon Quest III in 1988, a law was passed forbidding the release of new installments on any day other than a Sunday or a holiday to prevent children from ditching school to wait in line for the latest installment in the series. Spreading far beyond the confines of the home-gaming console, DQ has spawned live ballets, musical concerts, music CDs and albums featuring selections performed by the world-famous London Philharmonic Orchestra. It's a gaming phenomenon in Japan with no equal.

But things haven't gone nearly as smoothly here in the US, where the series has enjoyed moderate success in the wake of Final Fantasy, the reigning king of RPGs in the West. How ironic that they now find themselves under the same umbrella; never say never in the game business. We used to joke about playing Sonic on Nintendo or Final Fantasy on any platform outside the Nintendo Empire, as if the end of the world were more likely...yet here we are. But DQ's lukewarm reception in the states is brimful of extenuating circumstances: The first four Dragon Warrior titles (the series is steeped in religious overtones, its most seductive charm) suffered extensive censorship in accordance with Nintendo's restrictions on religious iconography. Even the box fronts were altered, replacing coffins with ghosts, crucifixes with stars and priests with healers; part of the great packaging calamity of the '80s and '90s that we still see remnants of today, when American publishers butcher fine Japanese art with clumsy Western airbrushing. Due to Enix's closure, DQ V and VI were never even officially released here, and so, the series has had its share of strife with US audiences. All things considered however, for a series that has never pushed the graphics envelope and features a garlic-shaped blue slime for a mascot, it's not too shabby. When Dragon Quest VII was finally released for the Japanese PlayStation in 2000 (it was originally planned for Super Famicom and then N64 back in 1997 to give you a sense of the delay) it became the best selling Japanese PlayStation game of all time, but it still didn't hit nearly as big in 2001 when it came to America, making it ever apparent that to break through in the West it would take more than a grand lineage and brilliant story telling to hit critical mass; it was time to up the graphics ante...but who to take on such a daunting task?

Chosen to do the DQ extreme makeover, Level-5 (Dark Cloud 2, the unjustly cancelled True Fantasy Live) have quite utterly shocked me to the very



"What Level-5 has done, basically, is taken the traditional turn-based RPG and made it live."







> "I have to put it on par with the first time I saw Alucard or experienced the sunken ship level in Super Mario 64."

core of my being. Admittedly, I am one of those hardcore RPG fans that never embraced Dragon Quest—not so much for the censorship, but more because Final Fantasy (and later Phantasy Star, Vermillion, Lunar, etc.) looked so much better. Well, that and my apathy with declaring war on blue gum drops; I'm extremely relieved that slimes don't appear nearly as much in DQ8 as they have in previous installments. So captivated was I within my first few hours with Dragon Quest 8 that I immediately unwrapped (I know, pathetic) and began playing Dragon Warrior VII on the side. If I didn't know what Dragon Quest was, the experience would qualify as a grand epiphany (as it will for so many unaware of the series), but aware of its grand lineage (Toriyama is an icon) and endemic characteristics I have to put it on par with the first time I saw Alucard or experienced the sunken ship level in Super Mario 64. DQ8 is now my favorite turn-based RPG of all time.

What Level-5 has done, basically, is taken the traditional turn-based RPG and made it live. I cannot tell you how done I was moving my icon over crude world maps or simply warping to locations, let alone the frustration of overly elaborate battles mired in pomp before the fighting even began. In Dragon Quest 8 everything is as it should be. Towns, villages, keeps and abbeys are real-time, painstakingly crafted and bustling with interesting people with a sense of purpose amidst a level of detail beyond measure: ivy spread out across walls and steps on separate layers, water that looks and reacts in accord with the surroundings, animation for the most rudimentary acts like opening doors or running, small pads of grass that envelop your feet, puffs of dirt and matching terrain as you walk or run, and most notably facial expressions that reflect mood to such a degree that it actually affects the dialogue. I can't tell you how refreshing it is to have an in-game conversation where the characters' mannerisms work in harmony with the dialogue rather than the usual analogous animation loop that turns most



The battles in DQ8 take on a life of their own.







These meticulously sculpted and detailed figures are currently available only in Japan although chances are they'll be making there way Stateside soon after the game, or at least one would certainly hope so.



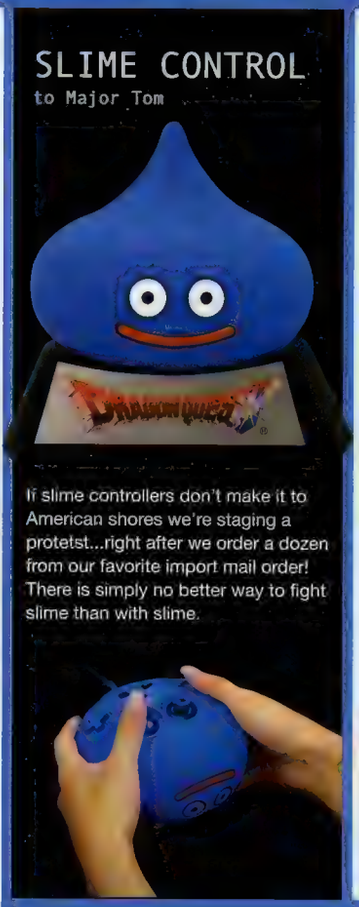
characters into brainless marionettes. Take a good look at the wardrobe too. Cloaks and worn accessories never fold into or melt through each other. It's an absolute masterwork. Living art is the only way to describe it.

Venturing out, if your destination is two miles away then you better get moving down the path…or not. If you can see an opening over the horizon, cut across the mountains and take your chances off the beaten path. There are always chests or rogue enemies waiting in the countryside for the bold adventurer. One moment in particular that made me stop and take heed was coming over the bluff between Alexandria and Port Prospect as the ocean comes into view a half-mile or so down the mountain; the tide visibly rolling in even from so far away. What's even better is that you can run down across the rocks onto the shore and level up fighting Yabbies and other assorted sea vermin in the surf. The freedom and sense of the world in DQ8 is uncanny—its panoramas by far the best I've ever seen. The battles themselves are quick to load and because the enemies are so alive, extraordinary, and reactive, every skirmish is a joy. Boss battles (and they are a wily bunch) require you to be at the ready, and should you die send you back to church for resurrection with half the coin, so be warned. It's a long trek back but once you get used to the flow of the game you'll learn to manage your resources with the utmost proficiency. Outside and in dungeons things are as lively as you can imagine. Dancing devils cause affected party members to break into rhythmic dance (I know it sounds corny but just wait 'til you see it), diminutive attackers wielding massive hammers too big for their size might topple over trying to reach you, and as the game progresses the sheer number of indigenous creatures is as daunting as it is utterly captivating. And not only do the enemies animate better than anything you've ever seen but they cast and reflect light and all have realistic death animations, rather than just disappear. Invention and attention to detail is alive and well in Dragon Quest 8. There's also a spell to avoid annoying attacks from weaker enemies when you're on the go, and they change from day to night which also happens in real time in the game. Enter a town or village at night and don't expect to stock up on supplies; everyone is asleep. Better to roam around and level up outside of town until you see the sun come up. Ah, what a lovely game this is. Unlike the Japanese version (which sold 3-million copies in one week) the US DQ8 also has a deep menu system where you can manage Items, Magic, and Attributes (on top of having actual speech, but more on that later). Success in battle is as, if not more, dependent on wielding the proper weapon and requisite skills than merely leveling up (although it too factors in) so you must keep a close eye on where you are and with whom you're frequenting in battle. Swords, Spears, Boomerangs, and Fisticuffs all have degrees of mastery and each weapon type has its place in the game. Simply maxing out a single skill for the duration is not recommended.

The alchemy pot is one of the games more unique devices where by using found recipes or experimenting with found items you can concoct special items in the wagon as you traverse the countryside. *Bon appétit!*



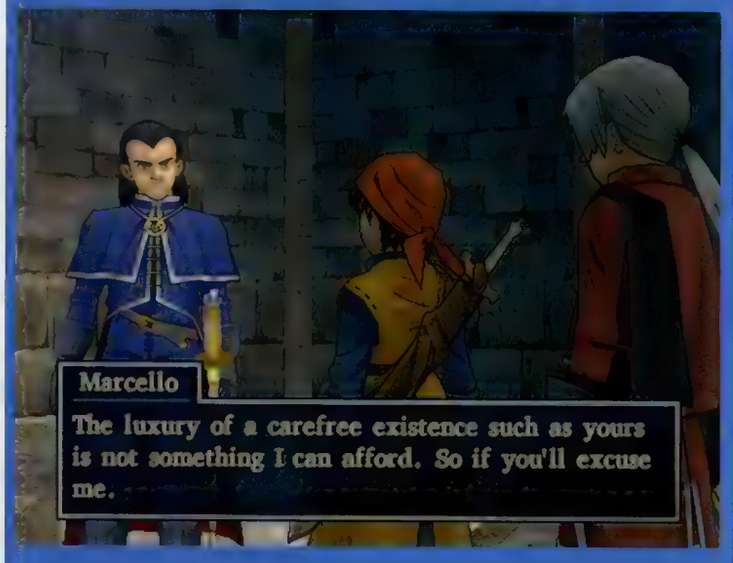




If slime controllers don't make it to American shores we're staging a protetst...right after we order a dozen from our favorite import mail order! There is simply no better way to fight slime than with slime.









> "The freedom and sense of the world in DQ8 is uncanny—its panoramas by far the best I've ever seen."

Not to be outdone in any way, shape or form, once your entire party is amassed you're given a ship and essentially left to your own non-linear devices. In an era where games essentially tell you how to proceed in fear that you'll get lost and run back to your retailer in a huff demanding a refund, Square Enix has actually decided to set you free. Not only does this greatly impact the flow of the game contingent on a host of variables, but it encourages the base principal of what role-playing games are supposed to be about: adventure…which leads to the most critical juncture of this review.

Speaking with series die-hards, they seem more concerned with the localization than anything else, which given the majesty of the visuals is certainly a testament to the series' story telling lineage. I suppose some setup is (finally) in order.

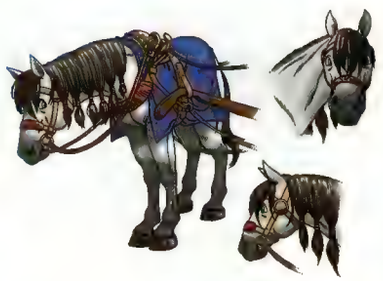
To all RPGs a villain must be born, and in this case he's a doozy…a jester by the name of Dhoulmagus, who I love for two reasons; he is a complete loon in the most likeable way (akin to Nicholson's Joker, say) and he's wonderfully creative. He seems to revel in his deviousness and I like that in an evildoer. Snatching a forbidden scepter long sealed away, he uses its power to place a curse on the kingdom, transforming the people to thorns…all but the King and Princess, whom he turns instead into a squalid green monster and horse, respectively. All but one escaped his fiendish horticulture…namely you, the unnamed player hired by his highness forthwith to track down the evil jester and reverse his cruel spell. Along the way… actually before the game gets underway (much of the setup is seen in flashback) the three pick up Yangus, a character whom I also loved the moment he opened his mouth and began spouting crude innuendo like a cross between Ozzy Osbourne and a drunken Bob Hoskins. Yes: Dragon Quest 8 is voiced by British actors. The setting for the Dragon Quest series has always been Medieval Europe and given that the English vernacular lends itself better to role-playing, the presentation is all the better for it. King Trodes, Yangus, and Jessica are probably the best vocalized characters in the history of American RPGs and the script on the whole easily topples any thing before it, due in no small part to the fact that the characters themselves actually deliver performances. And finally I must mention the score, which, while it does include series-endemic melodies, is full and rich to the extent that (I must sound like a broken record by now) it sounds too good to be in a video game. I know how pretentious that sounds, and I'd say the same about many a Final Fantasy or Castlevania, but Koichi Sugiyama has truly outdone himself.

There are only two things I'd like to have seen in DQ8 that didn't make it in, both of which are most certainly memory-related issues: Rather than have the party join as one on the world map it would have been nice to have them appear on the map together (that Jessica is mighty fine) and, given the detail, that the lead character is not dynamic to steps and slopes does take a bite out of the realism. Otherwise, and these don't even amount to a blip on the radar given the majesty of this game, Dragon Quest 8 is a perfect RPG. There is far more to discover than what I have managed to graze over here (such as monster breeding and side quests) amounting to a massive 60-70 hour long undertaking, but it is time very well spent, as you'll likely never forget your time with this amazing cast. The overall structure of the game is nothing new: You can still pop open chests in people's houses and search through their belongings to find useable items and such, but it wouldn't be Dragon Quest if you couldn't (it'd be Fable). DQ8 is the epitome and ultimate maturation of traditional role-playing, nothing more, nothing less.

Akira Toriyama

Born in Aichi in 1955. In 1978, Toriyama-san debuted as a manga artist in Weekly Shonen Jump. His name became famous with the success of *Dr. Slump* and *Dragon Ball*. The original Dragon Ball comic book series sold more than 120 million copies. With the worldwide success of *Dragon Ball*, Toriyama-san has become popular across a wide range of generations. Toriyama-san has been the character designer for the Dragon Quest series since the original title.





Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King — 10 Score

PlayStation 2

Everything

Nothing

Developer: Yuji Horii, Akira Toriyama, Koich Sugiyama, and Level-5 Inc. **Publisher:** Square Enix, Inc.
Online: None **Available:** November

INTERVIEW



Yuji Horii

Born in Hyogo in 1954. After graduating from the prestigious Waseda University with a major in literature, Horii-san became a freelance writer to write columns in newspapers and magazines. In 1982, he participated in the Game Programming Contest hosted by the former Enix Co. and won a prize which led him toward the path of game designer. In 1986 *Dragon Quest* was released in Japan. Throughout the past nineteen years, Horii-san has continued to develop Dragon Quest sequels, making the franchise into a huge social phenomenon in Japan. The latest installment, *Dragon Quest VIII*, sold 4 million copies in Japan since its release in August 2004. Horii-san is now known as the father of Dragon Quest. Besides the Dragon Quest series, Horii-san is also known as the scenario writer for the legendary RPG *Chrono Trigger*.



play: Deep character customization, witty dialogue, 'Horii-ism' puzzles, simple yet engulfing stories filled with twists and 70-100 hours play times are all DQ staples, although the graphics have remained on the simple side…until now. Did you team up with Level-5 with express purpose of creating an RPG as cutting edge technically as it masterful in these other areas? (Mission accomplished by the way).
Yuji Horii: First of all, I was amazed when I saw the prototype created by Level-5. Level-5 created a 3D world generated by computer, where Akira Toriyama's artwork came to life and was filled with a human feel, and a vast field where the player can explore as far as the eye can see. I felt that Level-5 can create what I had dreamed of since the first installment of the series. The key point was that I was able to create what I always wanted to do rather than being limited to the visual technology that was available.

Will you continue working with them? Might we see DQ9 on PS3?
I would love to continue the DQ series in various forms. However, what I always think to myself is "What kind of entertainment can I provide the players next time?" rather than "What kind of game should I make DQ IX?" At this point in time, I still don't know if that will be "DQ IX" or if it will be developed for the PS3. Currently in Japan we are developing a cute action game called "Slime Mori Mori Dragon Quest 2" for the Nintendo DS. I have to tell you, this game is also a lot of fun.

Do you always work very closely with Akira Toriyama on monster designs?
Akira Toriyama has worked on the character design and monster design for the Dragon Quest series up to now. Since our offices are in distant locations, we are not able to speak in person so often. Instead, I will send the ideas, background stories, and rough sketch of the characters to Mr. Toriyama, which he will then incorporate into his character design. After his design comes to my attention, I would sometimes request for some retouching, but for the most of the time, the designs are exactly what I imagined or far better, so it's pretty smooth until we complete the designs.





"Even with the game becoming fully 3D, I still believe that the heart of DQ is still there."

Although the series has been successful in the US, it is practically a religion in Japan. Have you been dissatisfied with the reception of past Dragon Quest titles in the US? To what extent was Dragon Quest 8 developed with an international audience in mind?
I believe that a game can be fun universally, and as long as people have a chance to enter into the world of a game, they should be able to understand how fun this game is. The past DQ titles showed their characters in an icon-like art, so I have to admit that not everyone was able to feel truly emotional about the game. However, thanks to Level-5, players can now enjoy the adventure more realistically. When we made the North American version, we also changed several things. For example, the menu became much more intuitive, voice-overs were added so that the characters' feelings can be expressed better, and we changed the background music to full orchestra version in order to add more tension to the adventure. During the E3 2005, DQVIII was received well along with various awards for best RPG. I'm sure that the finished product is something that the North American players can enjoy very much.

Even though VII had 3D elements this is obviously the first truly 3D version of the game. Would you say that free roaming 3D has allowed you to reach a new high in RPG creation? The game is certainly filled with stunning vistas and memorable moments.
Thank you very much. Even with the game becoming fully 3D, I still believe that the heart of DQ is still there. It's no doubt that DQVIII will be the new milestone of new DQ series for the future.

I found myself (gladly) leveling up to bolster my characters caches and skills although not so much as in previous versions. Is this part of a more accessible overall package?



Because of the full 3D visual style, party members in DQVIII look even more unique and interesting. In order for players to enjoy the characters' personality fully, we incorporated the "Skill System". It's all up to players how to customize the characters' skills, and I believe this system will make players enjoy customizing their characters. I always put a lot of consideration in keeping perfect balance in gameplay which the Psyche up system is a good example of.

Although the characters can wield many weapons is leveling up all of them evenly as you progress key or is it wise to concentrate on powering up one at a time?

In DQVIII, we created unique skills for each character. No matter which skills players raise, they can finish the game, so it's all up to each player. But in the earlier stage, it might be more beneficial for players to concentrate on raising one skill in order to learn a stronger move for a particular weapon. For example, a player might experience tough battles at first if he or she only raises fighting skill, but further in the game, it will be possible to fight a boss battle with using just a fist. There are many other ways of enjoying the game.

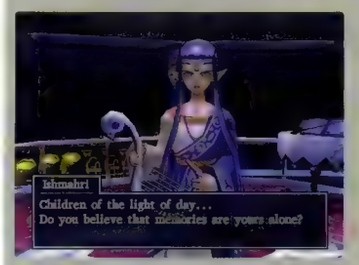
The recent trend in RPGs has been towards linear quests that leave the player little opportunity to deviate from the story, yet at a point in 8 you open up the world for the player (thank you). Are you concerned that casual players might become confused given no specific direction? What devices have you built in to keep casual gamers on track…Or should they simply seek out a strategy guide?

If you look at the field carefully, there is always a road to the next town. Therefore, if players follow the road, they will be able to reach to the next destination. Of course, it's ok to go off the road and wonder around the field freely. That will give a great chance to discover hidden treasure chests, or encounter with team monsters that can be added to the Monster team. In addition, each time when players resume the game, party members will tell them what have happened so far and what the next goal is. That will hopefully prevent beginner players from being lost on the way.

Dragon Quest 8 will likely be the first Dragon Quest title most Americans have played. Is there anything you would like to tell them about the heritage of the series? What was your favorite DQ title before this one?

The overall theme of DQ series is that players can experience "another life" through the game. DQV represented the theme the most, and I should say it's my favorite in the series. The basic storyline of DQV is that players will follow the story of the main character growing up from a little child to an adult, being married and becoming a father. Eventually, the main character along with his son and father, will battle with the Great Satan all together. It's a fun game with such an epic story. I hope there will be a chance for American fans to play this game in the future.





"The overall theme of DQ is that players can experience 'another life' through the game."

Is there any chance that past Dragon Quests will be remade using the new graphical style?

We, the team are excited that with DQVIII, the DQ series will re-launch in the North American countries. I hope the game will be played by many people. After the launch of DQVIII, I want to take some time to decide on the next plan for the North America.

Chrono Trigger is a legendary game among American RPG fans. What exactly was your role in that title?

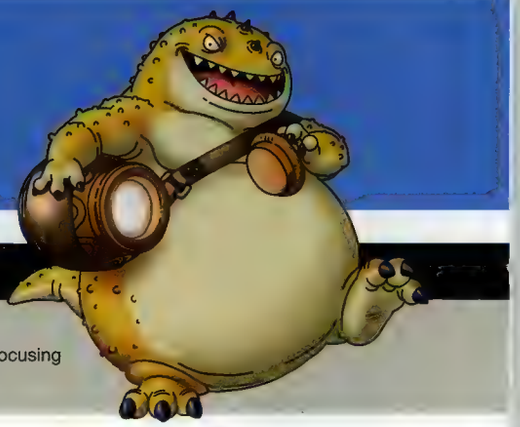
In Chrono Trigger, Hironobu Sakaguchi and I were involved together as supervisors. Mainly I worked on the story's plot. I wrote Chrono Trigger with a vision of time travel. A character would travel to the past, make some actions, and that would change the current or future situation of the character…. As a side note, I am a huge time travel fan. An old TV series, *Time Tunnel* was my favorite and I never missed an episode.

Thanks for yet another amazing journey…See you again in about 4 years? Maybe sooner…?

I wish the next DQ title will comes out sooner, too. As I said earlier, I want the fans to enjoy the adventure of "Dragon Quest" in many different ways. For example, I would be happy if we can also release "Slime Morimori DQ2" eventually in the US.



INTERVIEW





Akihiro Hino

Founded in October 1998, Level-5 developed *Dark Cloud*, one of the first RPGs for the PlayStation 2. With more than 100 developers, Level-5 is working on a variety of titles focusing on the Fantasy RPG genre. Their upcoming title is the highly anticipated *Rogue Galaxy*.

play: Converting one of the most legendary RPGs in the world into 3D had to be a daunting task. How did Level-5 and Yuji Horii get together? We're happy he's found a developer with matching skills to make his vision a reality in 3D.
Akihiro Hino: Horii-san had a look at the prototype that Level-5 created for the newest installment of Dragon Quest, and agreed upon the direction of the game. I'm very proud that our prototype triggered Horii-san to conceive what is now *Dragon Quest VIII*.

Was his vision for DQ in 3D set in stone or were you able to help mold the vision for the transition to 3D?
The direction of the 3D conversion was already decided at the prototype stage. Horii-san was actively involved during the production with the camera work and control of the game up until completion. In the end, I feel that the finished product is something that both sides are satisfied with.

When did the project begin? Was there much planning to do or was much of the story and design fleshed out when you began the project?
The story was laid out before the development started, but it changed drastically after Level-5 joined the team. I believe something tickled Horii-san's creativity and he wanted to fix lots of different things.

What was the collaboration like? How closely have you worked together throughout the development?
I really enjoyed the collaboration. Producing a game alongside Horii-san was very educational, and the development team at Square Enix was full of extremely fun people. We created a very pleasant and comfortable relationship with each other, which continued throughout the development. We basically communicated closely through phone calls and e-mail, but Horii-san and Sugiyama-san did come out to Fukuoka for the adjustments of the core parts.

I ask because I am so in awe of the details in this game. And not just the graphical ones but the mannerisms and how the characters movements match the speech. It's as if you're watching a scripted film rather than the usual robotic loops we're used to. How difficult is this to achieve in- engine?
The polygon engine for *DQVIII* was significantly altered and rebuilt from the previous titles. From a programming perspective, it's practically a complete makeover. We fine-tuned many elements to better convey the world of DQ. Because of these adjustments, we take pride in saying that Toriyama-san's Dragon Quest art style has been expressed to the fullest in *DQVIII*. As for the rest, I feel that each staff members' personal tastes contributed the sense of comfort ubiquitous in the world of *DQVIII*.

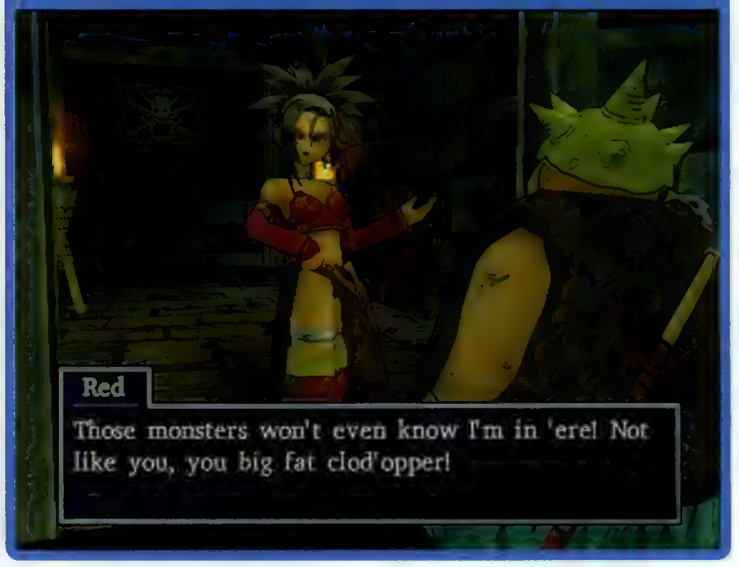
That same detail is evident in every corner of the game... puffs of dust or grass under foot, dynamic lighting... The ivy on the east tower is layered and leaks out onto the steps, and when you come over the bluff between Alexandria and Port prospect and see the ocean it is truly magical. Were moments such as this calculated or did they just happen that way?
We put a lot of attention to detail into the scenery development. For example, Horii-san had a vision for the scenery right outside of Farebury, (the first village in the game). In order to meet his desire, we had to adjust the area's layout. We also paid close attention to the scenery for areas when Horii-san gave us no particular instructions. The field layout in particular was completely changed and recreated when the production had less than six months remaining.

What does it take in terms of man hours to pull off this kind of detail? It's rarely achieved on this level but it makes all the difference...
The man-hours spent varied by scene. I can't go into details, but I recall the latter half getting completed at an enormous speed.

Another aspect of the design that caught my eye is how you manage to layer and animate clothing and accessories on your characters with no seep through. I don't think I've ever seen such clean characters. Is this something you consciously set out to achieve?
We didn't do anything different in particular. The only thing is maybe the polygon designer paid more attention in creating the polygon data so that there wouldn't be any clipping. That's about it.

I found myself doing quite a bit of leveling up outside of towns to purchase the best weapons and armor, mostly because you've given us such wonderful open environments to explore. Did you create them with this in mind? It would seem you're really encouraging exploration. I found more than a few surprises way off the beaten path...
In order to make exploring more fun, we placed treasure chests and roaming monsters on the field for the first time in Dragon Quest series history. These elements make the world outside not simply more enjoyable to look at, but to explore as well.

"I really enjoyed the collaboration. Producing a game alongside Horii-san was very educational..."

















MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Use of Drugs and Alcohol

XBOX

PlayStation.2

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GUN

Gettin' Wild in the West

It's a bloody shame the Wild West doesn't serve as the backdrop to more games. Guns, whores, gambling, senseless shootouts, and the spirited American history brought to virtual life; what's not to like? Neversoft agrees; that's why they've ditched Tony Hawk for Colton White, a rugged frontiersman out to find some gold, exact some revenge, and kill some peoples who need killing.

As for the killing part, Colton's good with shotguns, revolvers, rifles and the occasional stick of dynamite, which all shred the bad guys into bloody bits and pieces. The game carries a violent edge, and it's not playing off of a cartoon narrative and presentation in the slightest. When you see enemies crawling in agony, it's time to pull out the knife and finish with a clean scalping.

One of my favorite parts of the action is the quick-draw, which becomes widely useful early on in the game as you find yourself locked in a number of wild shootouts across neat set pieces like a moving ferry and heavily populated bar. The opposition will take hostages, flank, and duck for cover as you move through the flying bullets. When you feel it's necessary, the quick-draw slows down the action, draining your meter while you flick from target to target for a precise kill. It feels smooth and satisfying, a nice take on the familiar bullet-time effect.

GUN is very much a free-roaming, wide-open adventure, with a bevy of side quests and story branches that play out according to your leisure. I had a great time just sitting at the bar, playing Texas hold 'em for cash to buy supplies. Stock up on whisky; it's the game's healing juice you're gonna need plenty of.

As the opening tutorial gets you acclimated with the controls, setting up hunting sequences and target practice, you're introduced to your prized horse. Every western must have battles on steed, and here the cowboys and Indians wars have never been so densely portrayed. For a more serious, realistic take on the Wild West, GUN's off to claim new territory. Brady Fiechter

GUN

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC, 360

Point of Interest

Neversoft president Joel Jewitt bought a pair of horses to get the team a feeling for the real thing

Developer: Neversoft **Publisher:** Activision
Online: TBA **Available:** November

"Guns, whores, gambling, senseless shoot-outs, and the spirited American history"













Ain't nothin' like old-fashioned cowboys 'n' indians...



Six into 360 goes magnificently...

Namco may have overdone things slightly with Ridge Racer 6. "There are planes flying everywhere," Ryota Toyama, the game's localization producer admits. They bank and soar across 6's skies and are, indeed, ever present.

This is what Namco can do with the Xbox 360. Helicopters hover over race courses. Glass skyscrapers can catch and reflect the sunlight and skid marks stay etched into roadways as a reminder of a perfect drift. Environmental objects can be done—and overdone—and animated to create a game world that moves and pulses in a way few of its console brethren have. But that's just eye candy to be littered among the backgrounds. What happens in the foreground is ultimately more impressive.

Racer runs at 60fps, and is populated by high-definition car models. Under normal circumstances, game developers create these spectacular cars and "compact" them to create the in-game models so as not to overtax a console's abilities. Not here, and certainly not on Xbox 360. This is a new generation of game consoles, a new opportunity for greatness, and Namco's gorgeously rendered vehicles go into the game unmolested.

Six marks the popular driving game's debut on Xbox. It will also appear online for the first time, with Xbox Live hosting head-to-races, leaderboards, and downloadable content such as new cars and tracks. Ghost car data can be uploaded and downloaded too, with players able to match their skills against the best drivers from across the world. The number of human racers has yet to be decided for Live challenges, but 6's associate product marketing manager Lin Leng suggests a maximum of eight would be a good bet.

Here, bigger is better. Thirty courses and 130 cars are included, making this edition of Racer the most content-heavy. In World Xplorer mode, a series of hexagonal boxes are laid out across the screen, each representing a different automotive test. If a player completes all the challenges that surround a box with a question mark in it, they're rewarded with some token of Namco's esteem, and the mode's challenges can be selected or disregarded at will, allowing for a fully customizable race tour. There's also the option to replace the game's cool, but techno- and electronic music-heavy score with customized soundtracks created from either MP3s or WMAs.

With 6 scheduled to launch in November with the Xbox 360, there seems to be little cause for concern. The game both looks and plays beautifully, with the "drifting equals nitrous oxide" mechanic firmly intact and operating smoothly. Sliding into turns to avoid banging into obstacles and navigate without breaking proves a great challenge, and a technique worthy of mastering. There's also a tangible sense of speed to be had, and if coverwoman Reiko Nagase's dazzling smile is any indication, 6's streets may well be paved with gold.

Greg Orlando







Ridge Racer 6
Xbox 360

Point of Interest
Namco's classic racing game series makes its Xbox debut as a 360 launch title.

Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco
Online: TBD **Available:** November 22





KAMEO

Elements of Power

All the elements of a superb Rare adventure

I'm just going to come right out and say it—I've been a little worried about Rare for a while. Sure, we were blessed on the N64 with consecutive million sellers, but current gen has been pretty sparse. If you haven't been counting, we've seen three titles from Rare this generation: Star Fox Adventures for GameCube, Grabbed by the Ghoulies for Xbox, and Conker: Live and Reloaded. Now, Conker will always have a glittering little black place in my heart, but it was still a remake with added multiplayer; Star Fox was really fun but lacked that intangible magic for me; and Grabbed by the Ghoulies was hilarious, but wasn't exactly a homerun. I longed for that signature brilliance from the masterminds that brought us games like Banjo-Kazooie and Goldeneye. It's developers like them, after all, that continue to raise the bar for fun, enchanting titles—complex yet brilliantly executed. So like I said, I was worried for a little while... until I laid eyes on a pair of launch titles that seem to signal the beginning of their next era of





With the launch of the Xbox 360 Rare's again poised to deliver the kind of triple-A game that once swept me off my feet and made me never want to return to reality—a game that truly lives up to their '90s pedigree when they literally cornered the market on epic platformers. That game is Kameo.

The magical world you discover here is utterly breathtaking, everywhere you look another incredible sight to behold. It took three generations of consoles to finally find its way into our midst, but I'm telling you right here and now that when you see it you wouldn't want it any other way. Completely re-tooled for the Xbox 360, it's difficult to imagine the game any other way. Kameo sparkles and shines like a nymph-like siren, begging you to buy a 360 and be immersed in her world. When I saw Kameo at E3 this year I was blown away by the new visual horsepower, but sitting down and actually playing it, I can attest that the game actually plays as good as it looks...and you've never seen anything like this. Elements of Power is pure joy embodied in one little fairy-lady, the product of years of refining and improving the original design as Rare transitioned from Nintendo to Rare; Xbox to Xbox 360. Imagine, if you will, a Conker/Banjo-Kazooie/Ocarina of Time platformer, with all the collecting and little Rare-esque details that make hardcore platforming fans beam, yet retains enough simplicity and user-friendly options for casual gamers to enjoy (a key cog in the 360 gearworks) while still embodying a path for skilled players to traverse—truly the best of both worlds. A game for all ages and skill levels, and just perhaps the game that will put epic platformers back on the map.

Kameo begins with the kidnapping of our little heroine's family, and her subsequent journey to rescue them from the clutches of the evil troll king Thorn. Stripped of her morphing abilities early in the game, Kameo must traverse the lands, rescuing the spirits of the Elemental Warriors that will help her





The day and night cycle only exemplifies the 360's power.



My favorite plant warrior Pummel Weed has a very thorny side.



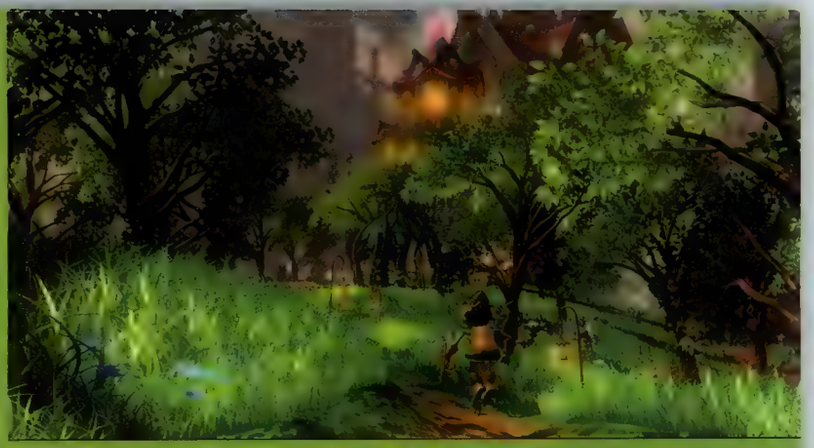
save the day. The landscape (in every area I was privy to see) is incredible; blades of grass sway in the wind, water is dynamic and laps up onto the water's edge, and Kameo walks with a lithe but determined step. Rare's included their penchant for collectibles through elemental fruits— but for those not inclined to search high and low through every level looking for them (something Rare admitted as a task casual gamers didn't quite like), you can opt to buy them with Runes instead. The biggest shock comes by way of the main hub (the now all-too-familiar field of trolls)... Since E3 they've added even more, if you can imagine that. Graphically, Kameo pushes the envelope beyond almost everything before it. Rare's use of parallax mapping gives every crack and crevice real depth for an overall stunning effect. When you morph into Major Ruin (the rock armadillo warrior), you really get the sense he's made of stone as if you could reach into the television and grab him. Heat shimmers when fire gets close, or if it's a particularly hot day you'll notice the heat beating down on you, warping your line of sight slightly while you traverse the world, collecting Warriors to morph into for the game's sea of indigenous devices. Rare's especially happy that they were able to make use of the Xbox 360's power to actually show Kameo's ghost-like figure residing within each element of power (something they couldn't accomplish on the Xbox), which keeps you connected to her even though you're controlling one of the elements.

Kameo's morphing is in real-time, allowing for some interesting puzzle-solving and some pretty tricky moments during the first part of the game. Oftentimes you'll be required to change forms in mid-action, making this the first "morph" game I've played that allows you to utilize all of the given powers at your own discretion; each one of them proves useful in solving different puzzles, sometimes even needing to morph in mid-air between warriors to progress. There are two warriors assigned to each element (fire, water, earth, ice, and flora) and they each have unique fighting styles and special moves (they all control differently, and can be upgraded with the aforementioned elemental fruits) Kameo will be able to buy or unlock, depending on your preference. All of the Elements play a key role in solving puzzles, journeying, and confronting the game's epic bosses, just like those Rare games of old, only on a much grander scale. You might develop a favorite to walk around as (I quite enjoyed Pummel Weed, a thorny, boxing plant that can root himself underground and uppercut an enemy hiding under an object) but you can switch to any earned Element on the fly. He has that same smarmy (and slightly maniacal) grin that you'd see on the face of an evil plant in Nightmare Before Christmas, and he's just so fun to beat up on baddies with!

Players that are totally in the zone when battling enemies have the opportunity to go into Focus Mode, wherein an aurora glows on the outer edge of the screen, time slows down, and your character continues to move at regular speed, allowing for huge combos and high point scores in an



They're hiding in there...which element is best suited to take them out?



The environments only get more and more incredible as you progress.



area. Those point scores will be registered on Xbox 360's Live program, adding lots of replayability for those desiring an uber-high score. In addition, for people that haven't really been exposed to video games too much but decide to take a shot at Kameo, there's Ortho, a wise old man come to life in book form. He'll advise you if there's a particular area you're stuck on, beginning with a small hint. From there the game will calculate how long you've been running around in an area and what actions you've performed so that Ortho can dish out hints accordingly, depending on how clueless he thinks you are. For hardcore fans, fear not as you'll be able to shut off help completely, but for the kids and casual gamers, this is a nice little backup life preserver that will ensure no one gets left behind.

Kameo herself is a beauty; she's light as a fairy (maybe because she is one) and controls accordingly. Her warriors also control according to the surroundings and type of beast you've morphed into. Deep Blue (a water warrior) controls so nicely underwater: He makes flowing turns, and when you're beneath the surface, he truly feels as if you're controlling something in water. All of the other warriors retain a unique feel, and it's a breath of fresh air knowing that Rare has given us a veritable smorgasbord of 11 warriors to choose from (10 warriors plus Kameo herself) that all feel distinctive in their control and movement.

Playing Kameo was one of the more joyful experiences I've had this year, and I'm going to call it early and say that she's going to sweep a lot of categories come award season. She's everything we've ever wanted in a game, and I simply cannot wait to play the entire game and experience her world. The voiceover is spot on (Rare's using professional voice talent for the first time), and the story is enchanting, something that will keep gamers glued to their new 360s with a smile on their face and a song in their heart. I'm all for the resurrection of the platformer as the king of console genres…but if Kameo's making them the queen, that's a-ok by me.

Ashley Esqueda

Kameo: Elements of Power

Xbox 360

Point of Interest

Kameo has jumped three consoles; it was first slated for release on the GameCube, then the Xbox, and will finally find its home on the Xbox360.

Developer: Rare **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios
Online: TBD **Available:** November 22, 2005



PERFECT DARK ZERO



Joanna's ready for her 360 closeup...and what a closeup it is

When Rare unleashed Perfect Dark for the Nintendo 64 back in 2000, few expected it to be better than GoldenEye, but it succeeded. Joanna Dark's work with the Carradine Institute in the slickly futuristic year of 2023 took us on a journey that many of us won't soon forget. Joanna was deadly, sexy, and embodied a true female heroine; she didn't take crap from anyone, but still retained a feminine aura that gave her an irresistible allure. She'll go down in history next to the likes of Samus Aran, another strong yet sexy leading lady (and both bounty hunters to boot). Perfect Dark Zero plans to show us how Joanna Dark came to be the Renaissance woman we met in the original installment.

The year is 2020. It's three years before the events occurring in the first Perfect Dark and the Joanna Dark we know and love doesn't exist yet; in fact, a 20-year-old Joanna is about to begin her training



Look at that heat shimmer, baby!



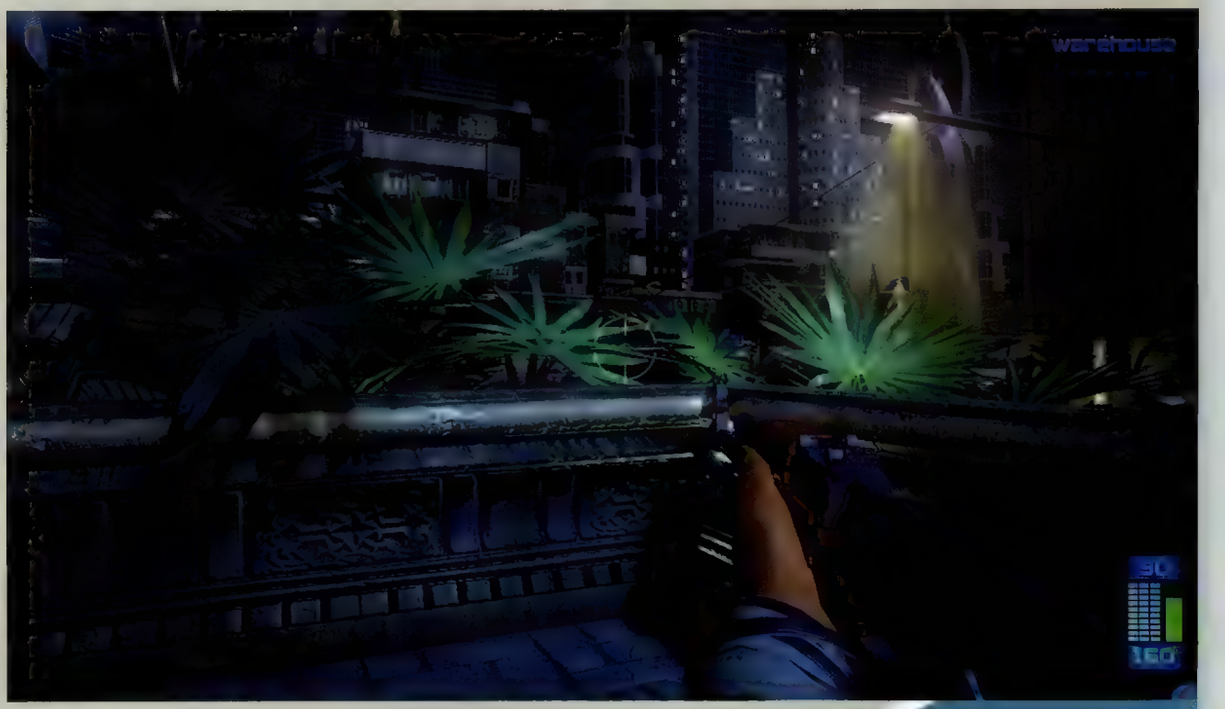
to become a bounty hunter, shadowing her father Jack Dark and preparing to work alongside him for their bail bonds company. She's grown up a remarkable gymnast, and participates in a sport named HoloDeathmatch (sponsored by none other than dataDyne, the corporation she fought against in the first PD), but her father has always kept her from the family business until now. The single-player story of PDZ will trek from her first mission as a fledgling bounty hunter to her eventual recruitment by the Carradine Institute, culminating in her agent status we're familiar with in the initial PD.

Rare's brought Joanna to the Xbox 360 in stunning fashion. Since she's three years younger (and nowhere near as collected as she was in the original), she's taken on a sort of reverse transformation. No longer do we see a professional agent of the Carradine Institute, we see a hip, sexy young lady with red hair and blonde highlights, tattoos and the like. She's a little rough around the edges metaphorically, but certainly not visually; the 360's power has given her curves in places I didn't even know existed. Graphically the 360 is a behemoth, and the addition of Rare's parallax mapping makes for a gorgeous game that's definitely getting filed under the heading "eye candy." I only wish I had seen Joanna more during my hands-on time. Since PDZ is a first-person shooter, you don't get many glances at Joanna's beauty (and her feet seem to be missing when she looks down), but the moments you do get are pretty— well, *pretty*.

Missions in PDZ have taken an interesting turn, similar to the first PD in that you'll be given different objectives depending on the three difficulty settings, but different in that you'll also be able to take alternate routes through a level within those difficulty settings. There are three main gadgets Joanna will be able to take with her on missions (usually you can only take one), and that will often determine what route you'll be able to take on a mission. There's a demo kit (for blasting your way through walls), a data thief (which allows Joanna to hack into and open doors), and an interesting little knickknack called the "locktopus" (a lockpick device). Weapons will be managed by choosing what to carry before a mission begins, and you'll only have four slots for your weaponry. Pistols might only take up one slot, but something like a rocket launcher's gonna take up three spaces, so it's up to a player to decide how they're going to attack any given mission. Take a sniper rifle and you'll need to rely heavily on stealth since the rifle takes up three slots. Take a pair of Uzis and things might get messy…

"Perfect Dark Zero plans to show us how Joanna Dark came to be the Renaissance woman we met in the original installment."

One of the most exciting additions to this Perfect Dark is a cooperative mode that's truly cooperative. You know how aggravating it is to spawn next to your teammate because they just walked through a checkpoint, but you didn't want to come with them? Well, wave goodbye to that, because in PDZ, the entire level loads before you begin, allowing for you and your teammate to complete your own




Archaeology computer room
19
135
103


warehouse office
200



JOANNA DARK
Not exactly the hardened agent we saw in the first Perfect Dark...

individual objectives in order to progress yourself and your buddy through the main mission. You'll be able to explore, get lost, and never feel like you're sewed at the hip to your partner, but you'll need to help each other in a leapfrog fashion in order to complete a mission. One player will play as Joanna while the other will control Jack, and you'll constantly be working together to progress through a level. A score will be doled out upon a level's completion (whether in single or co-op mode), and will tack itself to your Xbox Live account... but fear not, if you blew it the first 10 tries, you'll be able to replay that mission as many times as you wish to boost your score and save face with your online pals.

Speaking of your friends, PDZ's multiplayer is also putting a fresh face on the mode, offering level editors on par with the likes of Halo and Counter-Strike (and in some ways better). There will be an option for allowing a player into a game mid-match or locking them out until the next round begins (something Halo 2 fans will be happy about) and the six different multiplayer maps will be expandable or contractable, depending on how a group wants to face off. Want a small, fast-paced map with rocket launchers only? Done. A huge map with two safe bases, vehicles and sweet sniper locales? Check. Also, Rare looks to up the Xbox Live ante by offering two modes of multiplayer combat: a Counter-Strike-like Special Ops mode where players will only have one life per round and must buy their weaponry before the round begins; and a fully-realized Deathmatch mode with unlimited spawns (as in most FPS Deathmatches). Rare's definitely looking to change the face of online multiplayer, both figuratively and literally; the best player on a multiplayer team will have a special skin bestowed upon them (Joanna Dark is one of these special models, as is Jack Dark). This works as both a blessing and a curse, so if you're the best on a team, everyone will know it...but you can bet your enemies will want to take you out the most. Rare mentioned the possibility of downloadable content like new skins and maps in the future, but there wasn't anything concrete, so players will have to enjoy the six maps that come with the initial launch.

The time I spent with the lovely Joanna may have been brief, but it was a shining example of Rare's ability to take a video game character and blast them into another stratosphere. Joanna is her own star; she doesn't need a famous voice to go with her face (even though this is Rare's first foray into professional voiceover for their characters). She *is* Joanna Dark, not someone playing Joanna Dark, and that's going to be one of many small touches that make PDZ an FPS that's a step above the rest. Ashley Esqueda

Perfect Dark Zero
Xbox 360

Point of Interest
Rare will also offer a 2-disc box set for PDZ loaded with bonus content, a comic booklet, and a "Holographic Glyph Card".

Developer: Rare **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios
Online: Full Xbox Live Support **Available:** November 22

"Rare's definitely looking to change the face of online multiplayer matches, both figuratively and literally..."



Keep your rounds fresh, otherwise you might get caught off-guard.



METAL GEAR SOLID 4

GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS

Teaching an old Snake new tricks

Hideo Kojima is the game industry's master of hype. We should be wise to his tricks by now, should be able to look past his schemes. Instead we find ourselves in the palm of his hand, trailer after trailer. How do you top a game that single-handedly created a genre and continues to be aped by lesser developers to this day? With the mass-media mindrape of Raiden. How do you top Raiden? With Big Boss. How do you top Big Boss? Well, just take a look at this spread.

Señor Snake? Metal Gear MkII from Snatcher? Mass-produced Metal Gears swarming across vast cityscapes? Has Kojima gone mad? If so, it can only be in the best possible way. Perhaps the years of being forced to create endless Metal Gear sequels has left him a bit touched, and as much as we'd like to see an entirely new game from the man, we'll happily bow down and accept whatever he feels fit to bless us with. Initially announced back when MGS3 was first released, 4 was never meant to be directed by Hideo Kojima. One senses that the Director might be something of a perfectionist: He took over directing duties on 3 when it became clear his "younger staff" might not be up to the challenge, and history repeats itself with 4. Initially announced with the catchphrase "No place to hide – no place for Hideo!", 4 was set to be directed by his protégé, Shuyo Murata, who shared a co-writing credit on MGS3 and was the director of ZOE: The 2nd Runner. But as of May, Kojima is officially on-board, with his credit being announced at Tokyo Game Show as lead game designer, co-director, and co-writer.

Indeed, our first glimpse of the game running on a 2nd-generation PS3 devkit (finalized hardware won't be available until December) is classic Hideo tomfoolery. The Director delights in playing with his audience's expectations, and this is apparent from the very first shot, which leads the viewer into believing MGS4 might be a (gasp!) first-person shooter. A stunningly-rendered urban battlefield is revealed, with bullets flying overhead, bombs exploding, rubble and dust and scraps of paper permeating the air. But this is no cutscene. A lone combatant grips a futuristic assault rifle resembling the FN SCAR, advancing carefully through the mayhem. The entire tableau is played out via first-person camera. Various epithets ricochet across the screen: "FPS -- Forget Pre-Rendered Stuff!", "FPS -- Format? PlayStation Scenes", "FPS -- Finally a Policy Shift?" Eventually this "first-person camera", revealed to be an enemy soldier, is stylishly taken out by a lean, mulleted warrior, culminating in the proclamation: "This is no FPS. This is MGS!" Insert crowd's roar of approval here.

But wait -- what the heck's up with our boy? He appears to be in his sixties, sporting a new mechanical eyepatch. Before the viewer can quite come to grips with this revelation, the sneaking suit-wearing warrior infiltrates a bombed-out building in CQC stance. A quick sweep of the area indicates no hostilities...and he decides it's time for a smoke. At this point, ladies and gentlemen, there can no longer be any doubt. This is Solid Snake. Before he has a chance to light up, however, he is interrupted by a bomb blast, and the view shifts to the action outside: Platoons of soldiers patrolling the city streets, accompanied by tanks...and Metal Gears.



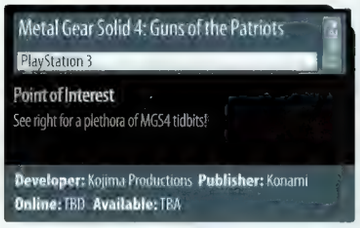
Plural. Looking like minaturized versions of Metal Gear REX with RAY's organic legs grafted on beneath, these next-generation Metal Gear GEKKOU ("Moonlight" in Japanese, though possibly a play on the reptilian naming theme) appear to be piloted by AI.

Suddenly, Snake is wracked with spasms, collapsing to his knees in pain. Withdrawing a syringe from his pack, he plunges it into his neck, and soon the convulsions subside. (This scene raises numerous questions: Is Snake ill? Is this a genetic effect caused by his cloning? Is it FOXDIE? Is the serum just barely keeping him alive? Will Snake die in MGS4?) Regaining his composure, Snake switches on his optical eyepatch, labelled "SOLID EYE SYSTEM" and resembling nothing so much as a Scouter from Dragon Ball. After surveying the situation outside, Snake becomes aware of a possible threat in the very same room with him, which is revealed

to be...wait for it...Metal Gear MkII from Snatcher. Not a mecha *resembling* Metal Gear MkII, the actual article -- its official name in MGS4 is "Metal Gear MkII".

But this Metal Gear is not an enemy. The little robot extends an LCD viewscreen, on which appears Snake's old comrade Otacon, looking a few years older and piloting by remote control. After a few pleasantries are exchanged, Otacon hands Snake a fresh clip for his assault rifle -- perhaps hinting at a new game mechanic -- and the pair exit the relative safety of the bombed-out shelter, plunging into the midst of battle. The trailer ends with a cheeky lecture from Otacon on the power of the Cell processor, complete with footage of the infamous Killzone PS3 trailer. You can't help but think that Kojima might be poking fun at it.

With that said, there's not much more anybody knows about MGS4. Kojima is remaining as tight-lipped as ever, but we've compiled a list of facts gleaned from official materials, the trailer, and statements made in interviews. Until the man feels the time is right to gift us with more details, this is all we've got. Let the speculation begin.
Nick Des Barres



What we (pretty much) know for sure about MGS4

- The game takes place "several years" after MGS2.
- Solid Snake is definitely the main playable character.
- Hideo Kojima will serve as co-director, joining previously announced director Shuyo Murata.
- Returning characters include Raiden, Otacon, Meryl Silverburgh, Revolver Ocelot, Vamp, and Naomi Hunter.
- Solid Snake has undergone premature aging due to the length of his telomeres being shorter than those of a natural-born human.
- The theme of the game is "Sense", following the "Meme", "Gene", and "Scene" of MGSs 1-3.
- The game will feature an all-new camera system, possibly based on the 3rd Person View Camera from Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence.
- Snake's enemy may not be entirely clear-cut. According to Kojima, if Snake defeats a soldier f... may consider him their ally, and vice-versa.
- Since the game now takes place at least a decade beyond our own time, the team has less restrictions on plausible weaponry and will introduce a futuristic weapon customization system with (reportedly) over 200 configurations.
- Snake will be supported by Metal Gear MkII, perhaps in a similar fashion to how Gillian Seed was supported by the same mecha in Snatcher.
- Somehow, psychological mind-games will become a factor in the gameplay, with the ability to intimidate enemy soldiers, and in turn be intimidated by them.
- CQC, a gameplay feature introduced in MGS3, will be carried over.
- The "!" that appears above enemies' heads when spotted, a series trademark, will probably not return.
- Online features similar to those in MGS3...



Disclaimer: When it comes to Director Kojima, anything is possible. As much as we love him, we'll never trust him again after the Raiden incident. Take all of the above with heaping helpings of salt.



"Has Kojima gone mad? If so, it can only be in the best possible way."





Is he or isn't he? Only Kojima knows for sure.



Legions of mass-produced Metal Gear GEKKOU prepare to put the hurt down on...somebody.



Even if all this seems astonishing, folks, let's not forget it's running on a devkit with an underclocked Cell processor and no RSX (the PS3's graphics unit). Translation: it's only going to get better looking.

THE MATRIX

PATH OF NEO



Zion or bust

I like Shiny games...a lot. It all began with a squirmy little fella by the name of Earthworm Jim and a game that did *everything* right; introducing a pile of new ideas, setting new benchmarks for animation and control, and spawning both an amazing cartoon and toy line. Next came EWJ 2, weird jogging animation and platforming on a barbeque grill (not so perfect, but great) followed by a myriad of groundbreaking, if not borderline experimental 3D games, including a PS gem by the name of Wild 9 (which I love to this day even though it was under-realized) and the world's first possession game, Messiah, which if you could get it to run featured a pudgy cherub who liked to possess and kill anyone in its path. Post Jim, Shiny had become more mad-scientist-lair than token pop-developer which was fine by me, as every other like developer had long since sputtered into obscurity. Then it happened... Just as I was dreaming of a true 3D EWJ sequel they went and landed The Matrix.

Of course the Wachowskis chose Shiny to do the honors; they were the game studio equivalent of their grand movie-making experiment. But the acquisition would send Atari into a bridge burning egomaniacal tirade, leveraging and embargoing coverage like they had discovered the iPod. Whether or not this has anything to do with the game's jaded reception is debatable, although it's hard to ignore reader reviews that rank overwhelmingly in the 7-10 range.

Even though I didn't get to chime in on Enter The Matrix, or even touch a playable until the game hit retail, I was one of few critics who sided with the game buying public (on Xbox and Game Cube at least) on a game that would go on to sell a gazillion copies after getting pummeled nearly as bad as the last two movies in the trilogy (which I also loved). In other words, the Matrix has *you*. This is one resilient franchise.

The Path of Neo was one of the industry's best kept secrets right up until E3 when we got our first taste of Shiny's answer to Enter the Matrix and there was no denying its technological prowess. The Burly Brawl perfectly represented on PS2 featuring hundreds of Agent Smiths? Pseudo-bump mapping on PS2?...The mad scientists were back at it, only something was missing. The funny (as in ironic and strange) thing is that the house that Jim built has forgotten the most crucial element of game design—the very foundation they themselves laid with EWJ.



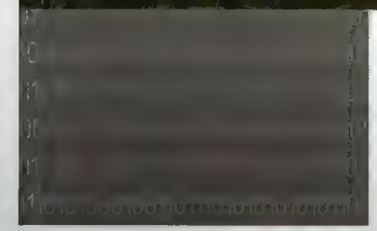






"...the level design and gameplay are fantastic, the strides in technology mind blowing, and the presentation stellar..."

Shiny's re-creation of s Burly Brawl is a hardware defying act of sheer dedication and innovation.





As drop-dead gorgeous as Path of Neo is, Neo himself is, in a word, broken. He feels too light, has awkward running animation (spine vertical and locked in place) and lacks a tangible connection with the environment. Where he desperately needs to be dynamic (see Primal) and feel solid and ultra-reactive (see Shaolin Monks) he is neither, resulting in a strange amalgam of high-tech meets low-tech character interaction. I'd much rather have a great playing character and less detail than amazing backgrounds and a broken lead, but with Shiny at the helm shouldn't I get both? Niobe was a super cool character (imagine if Aaliyah would have finished filming) that looked and felt great so it's hard to fathom why Neo isn't following suit. My hope is that this is indicative of the early build, because otherwise this is a remarkable looking and playing game. As far as the "path" itself goes however, as gorgeous as the game is, it is so mired in training, for so long, that it's all I could do to not scream. What amounts to intuitive controls—easily outlined in the manual or on a pause menu—are demonstrated so often I felt like saying "okay, here: you play it" whilst fighting through construct after construct after construct; a series of tech demos meant to tattoo the game's control scheme directly onto your brain. There are six buttons on the controller...I'm "The One"; I can take it from there. Linked together by a patchwork of movie clips, the game covers ground above and beyond what Neo experienced in the films; a great premise to be sure that could finally put the cherry on top of one of the most awe-inspiring film trilogies of all time...if they make the tutorial optional and fix Neo.

At this juncture two months from launch, the level design and gameplay are fantastic, the strides in technology mind blowing, and the presentation stellar but if they bark out commands for the duration and give me a broken demigod I may opt for the blue pill.

Dave Halverson

The Matrix: Path of Neo

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Point of Interest

The Matrix cost 65,000,000 to make, 20,000,000 to advertise and market, and earned a whopping 456,500,000 worldwide.

Developer: Shiny Entertainment **Publisher:** Atari
Online: None **Available:** November





Shining Force Neo

Shining on

Shining Force Neo poses an interesting question: Can traditional hack 'n' slash gameplay fitted with modern day accoutrements and an anime soul have as great an impact on US gamers as similar homegrown fare like Baldur's Gate and Champions of Norrath? Once upon a time the answer was unequivocally yes, but times are changing. Although similarly rooted in the rudimentary art of fighting, US hack 'n' slashers are a breed apart, rooted in dark lore, deep cleavage, and mature themes where Japanese monster disposal remains Hello Kitty innocent with key acts dedicated to such things as the importance of seasoning with fresh herbs. Neo has its share of drama—a father slain by a son once lost, turned blackest evil…brothers gifted in the Force torn apart by fate and turned against each other—but it's all very G-rated; more an excuse to swing your sword for hours on end than shed a tear or experience any indifference. Neo is also *very* dialogue heavy and though on the light side, all the better for it if you're so inclined…with the voice turned off. Where Neo falls apart—shatters even—is in the localization department. It'd be one thing if the casting was bad across the boards but tragically much of it is very good, the worst offender being the lead role, Max, who is voiced so painfully bad they should use this game on prisoners of war. He makes Beaver Cleaver look like Marilyn Manson. The guy is such a tool it boggles the mind as to how the voice track even got used. Sega HAS to fix their localization problems. This has been going on for far too long. Save it to say; turn the voice *off*.

What Neo has going for it that the other

"If Gauntlet and Dynasty Warriors had a baby it would look exactly like Neo."





Shining Force Neo: Secrets Below

Story treatment by Paul Chadwick

Max's return to Greensleeves was bittersweet. The swaying catwalks and houses shelved like fungi on the mighty tree trunks were dear. In this village he'd spent his childhood, high in the branches. He smiled. It was just as he left it two years ago.

But *he* was different. At Larcyle Fort, training had given him a lean muscularity and a wicked way with a sword. He'd earned respect he'd never had at Greensleeves, where his father Gaia was a hero, and his older brother Cain had outshone him in everything. Cain…gone three years now. Perhaps they'd have word of him.

Would they treat Max as a child or a man? He resolved to affect a grownup manner, and to find reason to mention his victories at swordplay.

Surprises awaited. Little Meryl had a sparkle in her eyes when she met the airship. Was it her new adeptness with magic? Her spell made his duffel float like a dandelion seed. He wasn't the only the one who'd learned new skills.

Meryl chattered on, mostly about the herbs she needed for Max's homecoming party. Meryl, cooking? The picture in Max's mind seemed strange, too grown-up for the girl. She left to prepare as he went to pay respects to Chairwoman Rebecca.

His grandmother, Rebecca, welcomed him with a kiss and the familiar attempt to smooth his hopelessly untamable red hair. Somehow he kept his dignity, and talk turned to the party.

"Don't make that face, Max. I taught Meryl cooking myself, so you know it'll

The special effects hit strong and often.



guys don't is the ability to literally cover the screen with monsters along with a heretofore unseen level of visual prowess for the genre: If Gauntlet and Dynasty Warriors had a baby it would look exactly like Neo. If old-school monster disposal floats your boat prepare to set sail. This is a monster breeding spout turned on high with the handle broken off. No matter the mission at hand the gist of the game is firmly rooted in Max and his companions hacking, shooting and healing the day away, mowing through legion after legion of monsters, sealing gate after gate after gate. The only diversity outside of character management comes by way of Gauntlet-type layered mazes which grow more complex as the game unfolds. Like any good top-down action game there are things to buy, weapons to forge, levels to gain, places to go and people to meet but what drives Neo (like pretty much every game like it) is the simple carnal act of mowing down monsters until you find



be good. If you're wise, you'll declare it superb and vow to make its wonderful cook your wife!'

Max gaped, horrified. He didn't think of Meryl – he'd known her since she was an infant! – in that way. Grandmother Rebecca laughed at him. But when he shared his resolve to become a Force, she wished him luck with true fervor.

Max passed soldiers on the catwalks and branch-ways. Word was monsters were about in the lower limbs.

"I'm short on herbs," Meryl told him when he made it to the kitchen. She left for the midlevel herb garden, and he stole a taste of the meal, musing that, admittedly, Meryl seemed less child than maiden.

"I didn't tell her about the monsters!" He dashed out, and indeed, piggish warriors were gating in, avid to cut down any who dared face them.

It was Max who did the cutting down, though. With fear and exultation, he fought through the smelly brutes. At last, he made it to Meryl, who – was beating down one with her staff! Magic, no doubt.

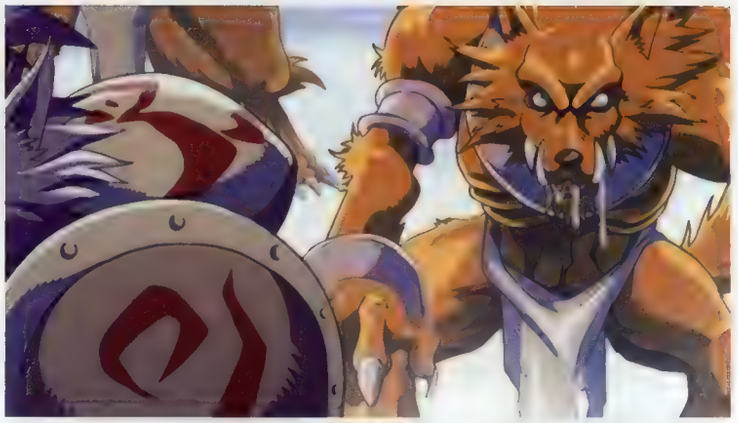




"...if you're looking for a good monster crawl, you couldn't do much better..."



Neo's anime cut scenes deliver the story in fitting style.





yourself overwhelmed, in which case you must retreat; attain the necessary skills to gain ground, and dive back in, pursuing the inherent goal of ogling the next destination, and in Neo's case watching the integrated anime unfold.

Me? Well, I'm somewhat at odds with Neo; mostly because I'd much rather see the Shining name on a modern day version of either Shining in the Darkness or Shining the Holy Arc. I love anime and am totally game for the odd Dungeon Explorer or Gauntlet clone, but when it says "Shining" on the label, I expect pure gold. As pretty as Neo is, the gameplay is very repetitious and can grow wearisome, even with the added character management and story elements. That's not to say fans of the genre won't like it; a few years ago I'd have killed for an import of this ilk, so if you're looking for a good monster crawl, you couldn't do much better, especially if you like your adventures long (although I hadn't finished the game as of press time, it seems well over 30 hours in duration).

It's so ironic in this age of uber complexity that the old Japanese take on "monsters" popping through portals to take over the world, or at least help whatever evil necromancer they happen to be serving is still alive and well. I can't help but wonder what motivates them to invade Earthly realms in the first place. They can't speak or articulate a thought, don't really need housing and seem to enjoy lumbering about more than anything else, so what do they need with flower pots and kitchen tables? Perhaps they just have a penchant for gamers. Dave Halverson

Shining Force Neo

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

Paul Chadwick was one of the first comic creators Andy and Larry Wachowski approached to create a comic story based on The Matrix, back before the first movie was even made.

Developer: Sega **Publisher:** Sega
Online: None **Available:** October

But, a problem: The swine had eaten the herbs! Somehow, Meryl convinced him to venture to where more herbs were – the forest floor.

It proved a mysterious sojourn. They saw rocklike eggs big enough to hold three men; and the Force Crystal itself – that which protects the world from the Clan of the Moon!

Max's father teased the secret of their trip out of them at the meal. Over steaming soup, Gaia explained: the Legions – monsters more terrible than the herb-thieves Max had bested, were imprisoned in those "eggs." They had been for the thirteen years since the terrible war.

Max was digesting this with his food when a soldier burst in. The worst had happened. The Legions were emerging! Gaia commanded the pair to stay inside, and rushed to battle.

Max and Meryl immediately disobeyed.

The Legions were formidable. Their loathsome, insectile forms took more sword-slashes than Max could manage, but Meryl's fiery magic helped, and they won through.

Just in time; Gaia was facing a new threat – a masked warrior who had emerged from the Force Crystal. An epic battle ensued, father and son united against the Other.

The other, who, on the verge of triumph, revealed himself.

It was Cain.

He was back.

He had changed most of all.



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MATURE 17+
M
Blood
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

TRAPT

PlayStation 2

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THE INCREDIBLES

RISE OF THE UNDERMINER

How deep does the mole hole go?





When it comes to doing right by "E for Everyone" mega-brands, THQ is truly in a class by themselves. Whether it's Jimmy Neutron, SpongeBob, Scooby Doo, or Tak and those nutty JuJu's, they always manage to crank out games that fit the kid-to-adult mold as deftly as the shows they're based on. It didn't used to be this way (Family Dog anyone?) but over the years things have definitely taken a turn for the better at Toy Headquarters, thanks in no small part to Heavy Iron, a young studio that's been cranking out the triple-A goods since game number two. Since their competent 2001 debut, Evil Dead: Hail to the King, they've gone on to create one Shagg-a-licious Scooby Doo game (Night of 100 Frights), two unforgettable SpongeBob games, the formidable companion game for The Incredibles and now are dipping toe into the uncharted waters of the Incredibles sequel, which we'll get to play rather than merely see.

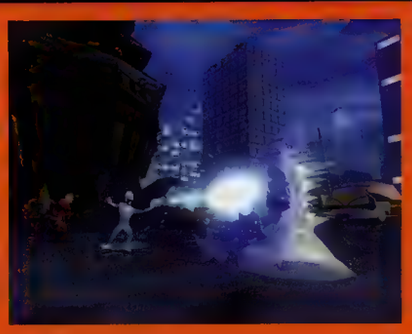
FroZone and Mr. Incredible take to (and under) the streets in Heavy Iron's incredible sequel.



Picking up exactly where the film left off as if they never yelled "cut!", the next mega villain to unhinge Metroville (or at least try), The Underminer (along with the usual scores of robot minions and a drill that looks straight out of the Zion clean up effort) comes burrowing up from the underground on a building sized drill with the usual intentions. First up to send him back from whence he came, Mr. Incredible and FroZone take to the streets in tag-team fashion (you can switch between them on the fly) with Fro able to freeze and Mr. Incredible punch and ground pound (among other things of course). From the get-go two things are crystal clear: the engine (and I played on PS2) is un-freaking believable, and you are in for one massively great movie game experience. This is how it's done boys and girls. No laborious build up

"...you are in for one massively great movie game experience."

A bird's-eye view of FroZone's bridge work.



FroZone puts on the freeze and Mr. Incredible puts on the hurt.

and no obtrusive training level (rather, Fro barks out commands) just epic action from outset... and what glorious action it is. Once things are cleaned up topside it's down we go, where Fro can create ice bridges and freeze projectiles for Mr. Incredible to pick up and hurl, as they edge towards the core of The Underminer's operation, or so they think. Our demo ended after defending scientists boarding choppers with various samples no doubt to discover just how deep the mole hole goes. While we'll have to wait to see how the rest of the family gets into the act, it's fairly safe to say that this will likely go down as among the best movie games ever made, easily topping Spidey and Batman's best.

This is the way to enjoy a sequel. Forgo the 100 million dollar plus 5 year film process and go straight to the game (not that I don't demand a movie sequel too). I can only imagine how seamless a transition this is about to become on next-gen but in the meantime current gen is looking mighty heroic. Dave Halverson

The Incredibles: Rise of the Underminer

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Point of Interest

The Incredibles was the first animated film to win an Oscar for sound.

Developer: Heavy Iron Studios **Publisher:** THQ
Online: None **Available:** November 11

Bad Day L.A.



American McGee strikes back

Bad Day L.A. is a game that's going to shock you. It's going to grab you by the face, slam you into the sidewalk and then point and laugh at you. It's the latest story from the fabled American McGee, and it's going to get in your head and not give a f--- what you think.

McGee showed us how dark fairy tales could be when he came up with *American McGee's Alice*, a twisted, mind-bending game that turned Wonderland upside down. Not just anyone is brave enough to toss Alice in an insane asylum, that's for sure, and after seeing McGee's version of the Jabberwocky I had nightmares for a week. Ok, it was a lot longer than a week, but that's only a testament **to how visually stimulating (and scary) his creations can be. So in some ways, his next project came as a bit of a shock to me... American McGee, doing *comedy*? Was the world coming to an end?

Apparently the end *is* here, at least to McGee, and it's happening in Los Angeles.

So now I've got you wondering: just what kind of game *is* Bad Day L.A.? McGee's response to that oh-so-burning question would be, "Essentially what it is is a disaster spoof. It is, if you can imagine, a *Day After Tomorrow* with Dave Chapelle as the lead character in it. We're sort of going in a retro direction, a third-person action-adventure with a really heavy emphasis on simplicity. Inside of that there's sort of three elements to the gameplay. One is this overarching goal the main character has to get out of Los Angeles. So at all times he's trying to move forward to some point of escape... Essentially what happens is, every time he gets into some mode of transportation to get away from the city, some other disaster strikes."

The game in a nutshell? Los Angeles pretty much has the worst day *ever*, including terrorist attacks, alien invasions, meteor showers, zombie infestations, and Los Angeles International Airport, so much a disaster in its own right that McGee didn't need to add any other type of twisted event to its bedlam. Anthony Williams, the title character, is homeless, rude, self-serving, and just wants to get the hell out of L.A. when disaster strikes. He's the complete antithesis of your standard issue hero, but he works so well as the game's protagonist because we relate to him. If a horde of disasters hit our hometowns, we'd want nothing more than to get out of the city and never look back. McGee describes Williams as "a really reluctant hero...9 times out of 10, when he goes to save someone, he inadvertently kills them. If it's a woman, he's often trying to pick up on her... He's not a bad guy, and the point of this game is not to make light of his suffering. The point of this game is to get a conversation started about how ridiculous it is that we live in this conscious state of fear of events that may never happen to us."

> "It is, if you can imagine, a Day After Tomorrow with Dave Chapelle as the lead character in it."
>
> American Mcgee, creator, Bad Day L.A.





Let's get em.



It's controversial, to be sure—they've gotten letters for just about every aspect of the game, from the lead character's baby-punting ways to his penchant for picking up the ladies while people are being smote left and right—but it's also *hilarious*, a title with adult humor that will actually make you laugh out loud while you play but also makes you think about the world we've come to exist in post-9/11. McGee told us about the first time he thought about getting out his political message, recalling, "The epiphany moment came in Hollywood on Sunset Boulevard. I saw this billboard, it had this politically correct rainbow of people, like the black guy, the Asian woman, the white woman, the blue kid or whatever and they're all looking really constipated and solemn looking down on traffic, and above them it said, 'Bio Chemical Terror Attack' and then down below it said, 'Are you prepared?' And I was like, 'No, I'm not. This is so ridiculous!'"

BDLA's gameplay runs the gamut, making our homeless hero help tag-a-long "partners" rescue blow up dolls from burning buildings, and strike down infected zombies (or heal them with a fire extinguisher). "At its heart, it's not really a shooter," McGee explains. "It's more like a chaos management game. There's a threat advisory level, and whenever you perform a positive action, you'll see these little smiley faces come up…whenever you perform a negative action, you get frownies. So if I kill these guys for no reason, that will generate a frown, and that adds to the threat advisory. As that moves up, the game becomes more and more difficult, the scenarios become more and more chaotic. So… while you've got these missions that you're trying to accomplish, you're also trying to constantly manage the chaos inside of the world. You can run around shooting stuff, it's definitely a shooter, but it's not like we're advising you to just go around murdering people for the sake of murdering people. There's definitely repercussions to his actions."









As with every other McGee-stamped license, expect Bad Day L.A. to have an artistic style all its own. BDLA looks like a walking, talking airplane emergency card, and the instruction manual for the game *is* an emergency procedure card. It's simple, but it works. Nail clippers are an ultimate weapon when you're navigating the perilous terminals of LAX (it's Bad Day L.A.'s BFG, if you will) and there's no shortage of cartoon gore throughout the game. Simply put, Bad Day L.A. looks to be the kind of game we need right now; it dares to push the envelope at a time where poking fun at our own fear is taboo.

Ashley Esqueda

Bad Day L.A.

Xbox, PC

Point of Interest

American McGee actually resides in Hong Kong… how's that for irony?

Developer: Enlight Software **Publisher:** Enlight Software

Available: Q1 2006

"It's controversial, to be sure—they've gotten letters for just about every aspect of the game..."

Post mortem

for...

Death Jr.

In Death there is new life, or so they say. We caught up with DJ Executive Producer Chris Charla to exhume the latest on the exploits of Death's impish offspring.

As the reviews pour in from both the press and consumers do you feel that Death Jr. has lived up to your expectations as the first big original PSP action game?
Well, I think it's safe to say that we're never going to be satisfied; we always think we can do better. But it's been really gratifying to see all the positive reviews and forum postings. Some of the reviews were less positive and we're trying to learn everything we can from those as well.

A spattering of gamers seem to be at odds with the camera even though you can snap it behind DJ, lock it in and strafe, which only leaves camera jams in tight spaces to squabble about. Is this something you'll be addressing in DJ 2?
I think people who are used to very standard platforming controls and camera were less comfortable with the "camera relative" shooting style of DJ; it really controlled more like a shooter, and players who wanted it to control like a standard platform game may have been frustrated, which sucks, and we apologize for that. Some people I think had more trouble getting the hang of it, or had more trouble dealing with the loss of the second analog stick, which was a bummer. I think there are a couple of small tweaks we could have made that would have felt nicer, and I also think we should have done a better job educating people about how to use the camera correctly.
Looking forward, we've learned a lot about camera and shooting controls for third-person action games and we're currently experimenting with a number of new styles which we think will solve the problem for everyone.

"The PSP is really powerful, but it is its own platform, and I think the best reviews and reviewers keep that in mind."

What about the percentage of shooting versus platforming? I know I wanted more even though the shooting and melee are awesome. Happy with where it's at or under internal scrutiny?
We were pretty happy with the levels, but we were concentrating on the combat, versus making things platform intensive. I think if we did a similar game in the future, we'd probably still have the same level of combat, but up the platforming to make an even more compelling experience.

I think I gave DJ his highest score among enthusiast press which I attribute to many things (aside from having an affinity for ghoulish critters and impeccable taste) like character and world design, music, tactical shooting, pacing, difficulty etc. as they pertain to *mobile* gaming. A lot of the reviews I've read don't seem to take the format (single analog and all) into account. It's a different animal isn't it?
In one sense it's super gratifying to be compared to Ratchet and Clank or other PS2 games! It shows we really raised the bar. On the other hand, it's really frustrating to be compared directly to games on a platform that in many ways has some intrinsic advantages over PSP (namely, the second analog), and found lacking. I mean, I love Untold Legends, but I don't think it compares directly to a PS2 game, and I don't judge it against PS2 games. The PSP is really powerful, but it is its own platform, and I think the best reviews and reviewers keep that in mind.
Some of the highest reviews came from the non-gaming press, people like the LA Times, San Jose Mercury News, and Detroit Free Press. I think these reviewers may have approached the game with more of an open opinion on the game, versus seeing that the game looked a certain way, and thus expecting it to play a certain way, so that was really interesting to us.

Speaking of which how is it that DJ loads so much less than almost every other PSP game and still looks so good?
We have some great technical know-how on our team, and we made short load-times a real priority! I think you'll see everyone have short load times as well in second-generation games, but we really wanted to get them short, because we hate waiting for games ourselves! This was a lot of work, especially with the size of our levels (some were upwards of 64MB, which is well above the PSP's 24MB usable RAM), but I think the team did an awesome job minimizing the between-level load times, and the in-level load times (which I think are totally non-existent). Doing that in a way that didn't crush the battery life was a big job, but our guys pulled it off really admirably.

I imagine you've received quite a bit of feedback on your end regarding all things DJ. Any particularly cool or better yet, strange?
Well, we had one person who sent in the game to us in an envelope… he had gotten frustrated at one point and thrown the game against a wall and totally destroyed the UMD! So, we sent him a new copy and he was happy, that was pretty funny. I have the destroyed UMD taped up on my wall now. I've definitely destroyed some controllers and carts in my time, so I could really sympathize! (At one point in Halo 2 I had to stop playing because I broke the controller, and it was my only S-type controller.)

What's the latest on the anime?
Unlike games, Anime takes a long time. It's still very early, and we're just as excited to see what's happening with it. The people involved are perfectionists, so we just have to be patient.

Have you and Konami considered bringing DJ to console? I reckon the new Revolution controller and the scythe would make for some interesting gameplay…
These people installed a restraining bolt in my neck, and it's making me say: "Death, Jr. has been very successful and we're happy with how well it's done, so we're evaluating the possibility of sequels."

I figured as much. How's the game doing? Best selling PSP game yet? Are you pleased with the numbers?
I'm trying to answer, but my restraining bolt is… "Death, Jr. has been very successful and we're happy with how well it's done, so we're evaluating the possibility of sequels."

Bah! So if you could have done one thing differently what would it have been?
We would have spent more time on the tutorial. There are a lot of things that are very important to playing the game (like realizing you need to tap L to fully lock on after the first enemy is killed while strafing) that only come up once. If you don't read carefully, you can easily skip past them, and then it's only in the manual, which no one reads. That makes for a way more frustrating experience.



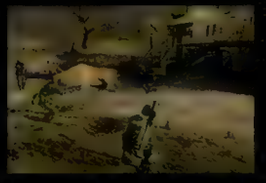
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Prince Of Persia: The Two Thrones

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

When the Prince of Persia, along with Kaileena—everyone's favorite Empress of Time—return home to their beloved Babylon, where they thought they'd find peace…only pain greets them. The kingdom ravaged by war and Kaileena the target of a brutal plot, the ensuing twists are beyond brutal and sets off a chain of events that should equate to the ultimate sequel. Montreal Studios have mixed things up considerably this time, allowing us to explore both sides of the prince's divided soul via two playable characters, a new "Speed Kill" system, open world Babylon environments, and…chariot racing that'd make Ben Hur fake sick. Looks too good to be true does it not? So does King Kong; must be something in the water in Montreal. **Dave Halverson**

Dev: Ubisoft: Montreal Studios **Pub:** Ubisoft **Available:** December



Test Drive Unlimited

Xbox 360

Taking the racing to the winding roads of Hawaii, Test Drive Unlimited offers immense customization of both bikes and high-performance cars. The online component is getting big attention, where you can compete for all sorts of rare parts, new rides, clothing and even the garages you hold it all in. It's all in the details: windows open, the radio works, wipers whisk away the weather. Because the cars are licensed behemoths, you'll have access to upgrades from actual catalogues. **Brady Fiechter**

Dev: Eden Games **Pub:** Atari **Available:** TBA

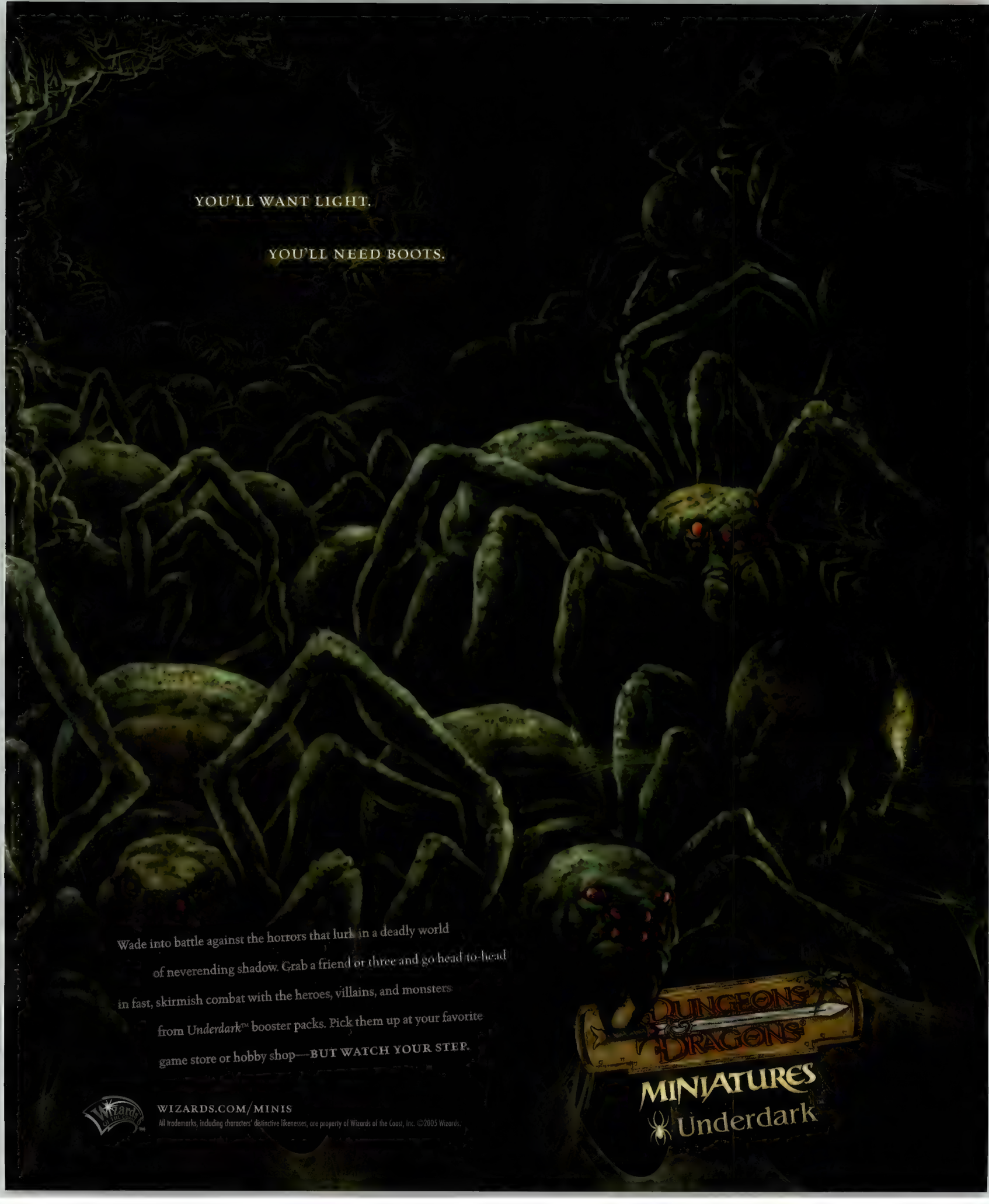


Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana 2

PlayStation 2

With any luck Gust's Atelier Iris 2 will address the minor issues that plagued the first; namely Landstalker jumping on isometric fields that had improper or broken collision, and the odd boring map. Otherwise this an absolutely spectacular brand of RPG featuring among the best battle systems around presented in lovely 2D with large well animated sprites. The sequel, about an alchemist named Felt, on a journey of self discovery focuses (like the first game) on dual leads, this time sharing a common items pouch but venturing out solo while one stays behind to forge weapons, manage items and basically hold down the fort. It sure would be great to get a version of Atelier that plays as great as it looks. **Dave Halverson**

Dev: Gust **Pub:** NIS America **Available:** TBA


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Dead Rising

Xbox 360

One of the most talked about but mysterious "launch window" (more like a sliding glass door) Xbox 360 titles; new TGS screens have surfaced for Capcom's Dead Rising, which seems to be taking shape. Clearly not the Dynasty Warriors with zombies we feared, our protagonist Frank West seems to have a Tarentino tinged female in tow that we think is his girlfriend although there is no word yet on whether she's playable in single or two-player, via Live or what have you, as Capcom are remaining tight lipped on the subject. As zombie outbreaks go this looks like a bad one though (which is good for us) so lets hope it's a great game too. Usually when Capcom and zombies get together the results speak for themselves. **Dave Halverson**

Dev: Capcom **Pub:** Capcom **Available:** TBA 2006



Fatal Frame 3: The Tormented

PlayStation 2

Fatal Frame 3: The Tormented is taking the unsettling mood of this effective survival horror series a step further, focusing on creepier ghosts and more story detail. For this latest installment, a photographer named Rei finds an image of her dead fiancé in one of her pictures taken at an old abandoned house, setting the wheels in motion for another jaunt into psychological terror with the camera obscura. She meets up with a pair of characters who also become playable, alternating between a dream world and reality. **Brady Fiechter**

Dev: Tecmo **Pub:** Tecmo **Available:** November



Need For Speed Most Wanted

Xbox 360, PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

In motion, the Xbox 360 version of Wanted (shown) glides regally. Most intriguing, perhaps, are its challenge races, wherein drivers must alternately evade and then escape from the police. Bolstered by an interesting new "Speedbreaker" feature, chases can be slowed down dramatically for a few seconds, allowing for last-second escapes and providing a car with extra mass to plow through peril. Drifting provides for extra speedbreaker time, and pursuit breaker obstacles such as gas stations and grounded boats litter the courses, waiting for some car to destroy them and thus distract the black and whites. Just like in real life. **Greg Orlando**

Dev: EA Canada **Pub:** Electronic Arts **Available:** October

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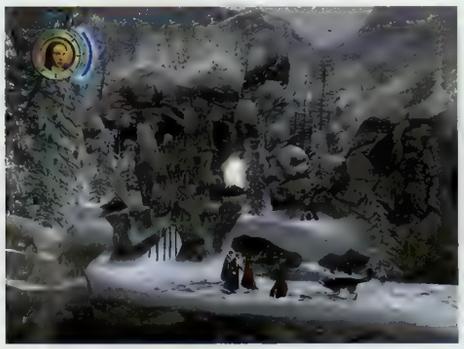


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The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Seeing the trilogy of books that jump started my imagination as a wee lad come to life in a game is a bit on the strange side especially with the childrens' icons plastered on places in the environment where their skills are needed but I'm not passing judgment just yet. Set up in co-op utility form, where each child has a designated gift to help solve a series of action puzzles and the like (at least early on), Narnia arrived at the tail end of the Nov. cycle so I didn't spend nearly enough time with the game to give you a comprehensive report, although I can attest that is spectacular to look at. Early on the amount of prodding is a bit much for my taste but, hopefully it lets up by the time Aslan shows. **Dave Halverson**

Dev: Traveller's Tales **Pub:** The Wardrobe **Available:** November 14



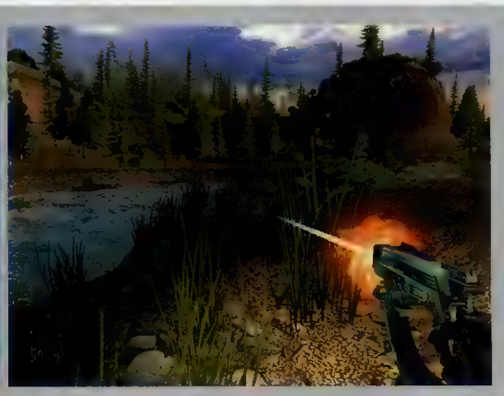
The Movies

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Ok, so you've got the makeover building to keep your actor's looking good and happy about their appearance. The director has been honed for your hand-picked sci-fi script. The budget has accounted for rehab, PR, marketing, sound stages, salaries, everything you can possibly think of. The studio's decorated with all kinds of shrubbery and specific walkways to keep traffic moving smoothly. It's all in order, but… your movie ends up sucking hard, getting awful reviews and pathetic grosses. Just more incentive to learn and improve for the next round of filming.
Brady Fiechter

Dev: Lionhead Studios **Pub:** Activision **Available:** November





Time Shift

Xbox, Xbox 360, PC

The world has been annihilated. The record of our existence has been erased. But it's all good, because you have this time-traveling suite, and you get to manipulate time and make it all better. While the story plays around the idea of time travel, the concept actually affects gameplay, allowing you to deal with puzzles and shift the action through your exploits. Combat involves such weapons as plasmas guns, hybrid grenades, and the swarm cannon. **Brady Fiechter**

Dev: Saber Interactive **Pub:** Atari **Available:** Fall

Trapt

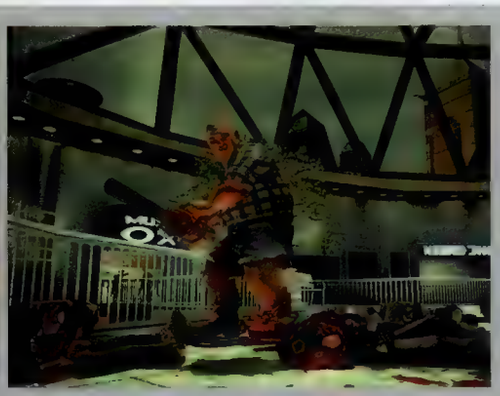
PlayStation2

Headed up by the team responsible for Deception and essentially working off the same concept, Trapt takes place in old Europe castle, where the devil and general evil doings are on the loose. You play as the vengeful Allura, bent on mutilating her enemies with medieval traps, reveling in their gory demise. Confrontations are more indirect, requiring thought over reflex. The castle is intricate and vast, offering a number of devilish scenarios. **Brady Fiechter**



Dev: Tecmo **Pub:** Tecmo **Available:** December





Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse

Xbox

Bet you never thought you'd get to be the zombie…Now you can munch brains, chase hot women, and cause a complete nuisance while turning the retro futuristic utopian city of Punchbowl completely on its ear. Meet Stubbs; gaming's first and only traveling salesman turned zombie. The gameplay here—riding on the Halo engine no less—is like no other as Stubbs traverses the land eating brains to create willing minions (he can signal and control them; even shove them in harms way) while infiltrating the massive cityscape. Vehicles, weapons, you name it; it's in here, and is it ever hilarious. It may sound like a gimmick but this is a well-produced and polished game that I can truly say is like no other. **Dave Halverson**

Dev: ASPYR **Pub:** Wideload Games **Available:** October

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Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D
Now playing: Castlevania: Curse of Darkness, Magna Carta, Gunstar SP
Favorite Franchise: Castlevania



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Shadow of the Colossus, Jak X: Combat Racing
Favorite Franchise: Castlevania



Ashley "Veela" Esqueda
Senior Editor

First thing's first: Ashley's convinced that everyone with an ounce of common sense should have a contingency plan in the event of a widespread zombie infestation. Other than that, she greatly enjoys pleying games that enchant and entertain, whether through sound or sight. She frequently waxes poetic about the merits of life, love, and video games.

Favorite genres: Action, RPGs, FPS, MMORPGs, adventure, platformers
Now playing: PoPoLoCrois, Karaoke Revolution Party
Favorite Franchise: Castlevania



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Guild Wars, Battlefield 2, World of Warcraft
Favorite Franchise: Sonic



Greg Orlando
Associate Editor

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless..

Favorite genres: Rynthm panic and monster nurturing
Now playing: Burnout Revenge, The Warriors
Favorite Franchise: ToeJam and Earl



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMORPGs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangaio.

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow
Favorite Franchise: Mario

Reviews

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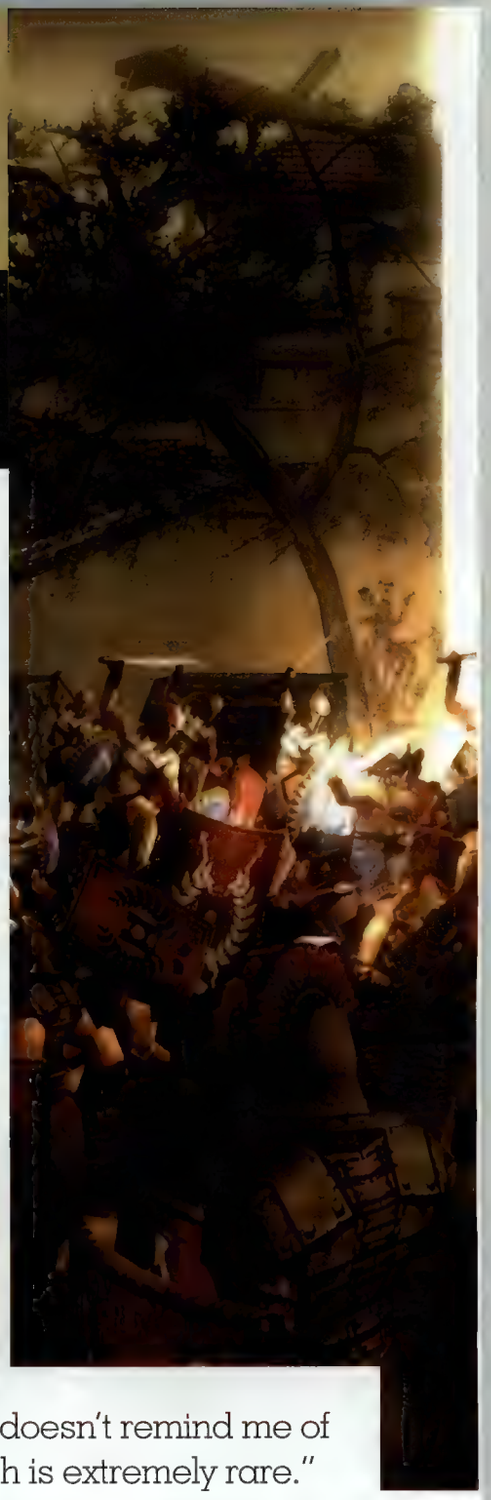


Rating System

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game isn't just the very best—it's the best of the best.

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

SPARTAN
TOTAL WARRIOR
Be the barbarian



Rome is everywhere you turn these days, including Sega's inspired and refreshing new take on Sparta's last stand against the invading and seemingly invincible Roman Empire. This is definitely a trend I can get behind; In contrast to far too many games depicting the painful reality of modern day urban debauchery, games predating the birth of Christ are justifiably rooted in carnage, as early civilizations bent on global domination combed the flat Earth in service of their respective empires' thirst for ultimate power…

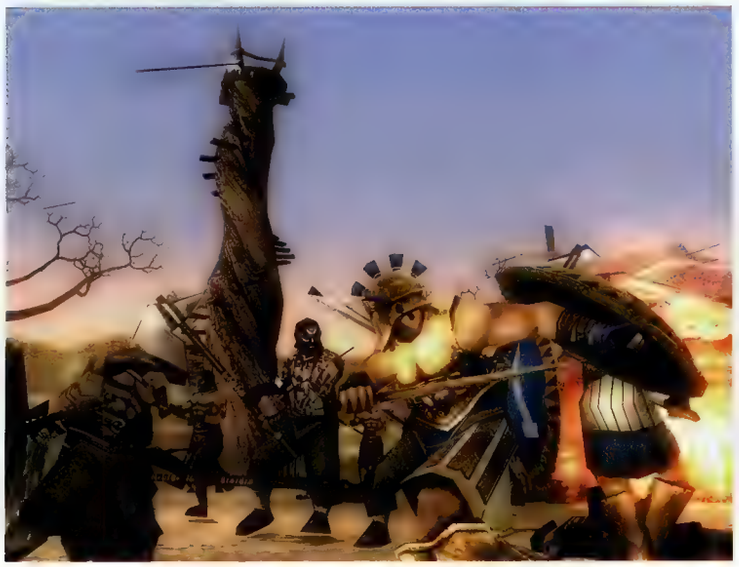
In the wake of insurmountable odds, with Greece fallen and Sparta's greatest warriors slaughtered, King Leonidas calls upon the newly trained reserves to hold the city walls—among them one very special warrior guided by the God of War himself, Ares. Through him Ares will deliver his vengeance on Rome, initially by defending Sparta and then by leaving it, venturing out into the unknown to rip the empire's heart out from the bowels of Troy.

Unlike more rigid historical fare, STW takes matters in a bold new direction by combining traditional warfare—using a spectacular move set that deftly incorporates every button on the control pad—with mythology, sorcery, and all out invention. I'm pretty sure Rome didn't possess a beam weapon powered by Medusa's gaze, but it's easily the second best way to get stoned I've come across. What's more is that it's set to arcade-style audio prods and a rapturous fusion of drum 'n bass over traditional Romanesque arrangements. Spartan Total Warrior doesn't remind me of anything before it, which is extremely rare.

Initially taken in by its scope and fresh take on scripted scenarios regardless of the focal point (you can move seamlessly from panoramic to close-up views at will), the game throws its first curve in short order. As much as I enjoy dispatching enemy hordes and slathering uninvited





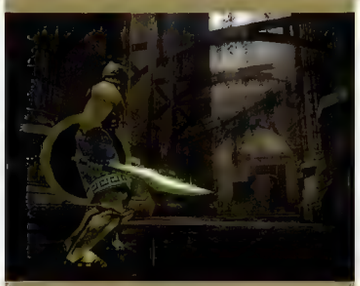


"Spartan Total Warrior doesn't remind me of anything before it, which is extremely rare."



guests with boiling oil, the first segue is as welcome as the PS2-defying engine it rides on. On Ares' diktat, the second order of business is an unexpected covert mission into an immense Roman encampment to steal back a pair of sacred blades, which is also where we meet Electra, Princess of the Amazons (just as I was craving a pivotal female) and ultimately embark on the larger quest en route to Troy, with her and your kinsmen by your side, to obtain the Spear of Achilles. What begins as the defense of Sparta quickly spirals into an epic cinematic adventure paved with diversity amidst massive environmental puzzles and real time tactical battles. The play mechanics and scenarios run the gamut and you never know what's around the corner: Protection, search and destroy, mass slaughter, demolitions, eerie solo treks, environmental puzzles, boss and mini-boss battles…it's all inside, and decidedly different in execution. The only fly in the ointment (and it really isn't, given the engine and hardware limitations) is that the models up close appear blocky, but they are textured and silhouetted very well so it's barely a blip on the radar given how many and how much is being displayed on screen. Imagining what Spartan would look like on 360 or PS3 with normal mapping and detailed character models, Sega would be well served to begin working on a next-gen sequel right away.

Amidst a fall season clogged with sequels, retreads and few fresh experiences, Spartan Total Warrior should be at the very top of your list regardless of which console you own, especially if you're flying solo with a GameCube, in which case this is among the year's very best.
Dave Halverson



Can you imagine this kind of magnificence come next-gen?

Spartan: Total Warrior — 9.0 Score

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

+ Robust engine, diverse gameplay, lots of unlockables, great soundtrack, and reanimated skeletons!

− Models are a little blocky up close but it's to be expected, and the voice acting is a little flat in spots

Developer: Creative Assembly **Publisher:** Sega
Online: None **Available:** September

Resident Evil 4

Brawn of the dead...



The new hat theory of video game development states that that which sells can be made to sell again, provided its port or next iteration goes out the door with the tiniest of alterations (a new bonnet, if you will) – just enough to warrant a $40 price tag, a change in venue, or upping the number after its title by one. For years, Capcom's creepy Resident Evil series coasted on the strength of its George A. Romero world-gone-wrong horrors and the new hat; the games sold and sold, so there was no need to change the awkward control system, the shambling zombie antagonists, and so-clever-as-to-be-obtuse puzzles.

With Resident Evil 4 for the Nintendo GameCube, Capcom took the new hat and fed it to the wood chipper. The game was a brilliant reworking and reimagining of the series, one firmly rooted in the Evil universe but with the guts to leap off into new territory. More to the point: Evil 4 was also honest enough to admit changes were needed, and made them. Protagonist Leon Kennedy still maneuvered through the freakshow in the third-person, but did so this time with a camera following him from behind his shoulder, making the terror seem more immediate than it ever did in the previous versions' more detached and pulled-away views. Evil 4 also shifted its emphasis away from cramped, claustrophobic survival horror toward a more fast-paced and action-oriented run-and-gun style adventure with the hero being plagued by foes that didn't shamble but outright sprinted. Kennedy as an action hero was fleshed out with new moves; his great feats of derring-do included getting off spectacular shots to deflect projectiles thrown at him and punishing stunned enemies by grabbing them from behind and issuing brain-crushing suplexes. And when Kennedy flirted with his handler Hunnigan, or took a petty but rather satisfying revenge on a diminutive foe by shooting at his listening device to give the creep an earache, there was a sense, too, that the man behind the action hero was also given some much-needed attention.

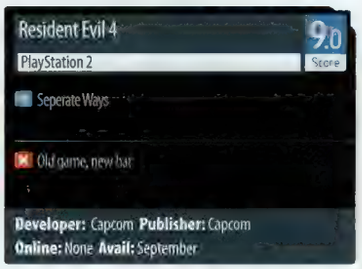
Capcom turned the venerable but stagnant series around with Evil 4. The game proved itself to be the best in the series, deftly outdoing its charming but somewhat clumsy predecessors by creating a fluid hero who moved freely among a series of nimble adversaries. The game quickened its pace and toned down the puzzles that served to arrest the previous titles' momentum, and in doing so found itself a new breathless horror that powered the game through to its conclusion. In its excellence, the game fairly screamed for a new (and larger) market. Something this delightfully Evil needed its terror shared.

> "Capcom turned the venerable but stagnant series around with Evil 4."



Proving it hadn't totally scrapped its shrewd business strategy, Capcom has released Resident Evil 4 for PlayStation 2. Changes between the versions are minimal, with the PlayStation version sporting an all-new minigame titled Separate Ways for the morally ambiguous supporting character Ada Wong, some small few costume and weapon additions, and the option to use a television's progressive scan. Aesthetically, the game remains unchanged. The entirety of the main game remains unaltered as well, or has been modified in such tiny ways as to defeat detection. This is Resident Evil 4 with a fine new chapeau, and the only question that remains to be asked is if the new topper is finery worth donning. Greg Orlando









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Shin Megami Tensei Digital Devil Saga 2

Dance with the devil

RPG fans only had to wait 6 months for the sequel to Atlus Co.'s Digital Devil Saga, and while it's similar in presentation, it's sure to strike a chord with fans of the original. When we last saw Serph, he and his comrades had reached Nirvana, only to discover the people petrified with horrific looks on their faces… Setting out to discover why the innocent citizens of Nirvana are trapped in stone, Serph encounters an entirely new adventure to tackle, and the open-ended leveling system, artistry, and one-of-a-kind gameplay begins anew.

For those of you not familiar with the Digital Devil Saga universe, part of the fun is the ability to transform your party members into the demons they've been imbued with, pulling off combos and upgrading their special attacks as you progress through the game. Experience rises fairly quickly, although towards the end I felt that slight tug of a grind while putting the final touches on my minions. Speaking of the characters, Serph and Co. are magnificently portrayed. Who else but Atlus would devise a character so sinister that she has boobs with gaping maws? Your companions might seem pretty dull at first, but oncetransformed, it's a whole different ballgame model-wise. The devils they morph into are exquisitely creepy, while retaining a semblance of eerie beauty that's grown increasingly rare in recent years. Their attacks are fascinating to watch, as their parts animate and twist so oddly you'll find yourself tilting your head on occasion, watching them bring the pain.

The leveling system in DDS2 is quite interesting to utilize. You're placed in the middle of a hexagonal grid (created by smaller hexagons) where each unit is either a new skill or a level-up for a skill you already possess while certain tiles cannot be accessed for training until a particular character learns all of the abilities surrounding it, making for some very open-ended character customization. We'll never see materia in an RPG again (although I'm still one of the few holding out for a miracle), but this turned out to be a system I enjoyed immensely. Being able to thoroughly customize any of my party members really allowed me to stretch my wings and experiment with each character.

All technical aspects aside, your gameplay experience in DDS2 is what truly makes it worthy of the upper echelon of RPG-dom. The characters exhibit excellent story arc and development, and the cutscenes are indeed a fine bit of eye candy. I said it before and I'll say it again… it's not groundbreaking, but it's more than good enough for traditional RPG fans.

Ashley Esqueda

"The devils they morph into are exquisitely creepy, while retaining a semblance of eerie beauty..."

Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga 2 — 8.5 Score

PlayStation 2

Great story, the character models are beautiful, and the leveling system isn't mired in traditional RPG constraints

Not groundbreaking, and the musical score is forgettable

Developer: Atlus Co. **Publisher:** Atlus Co.
Online: None **Available:** October

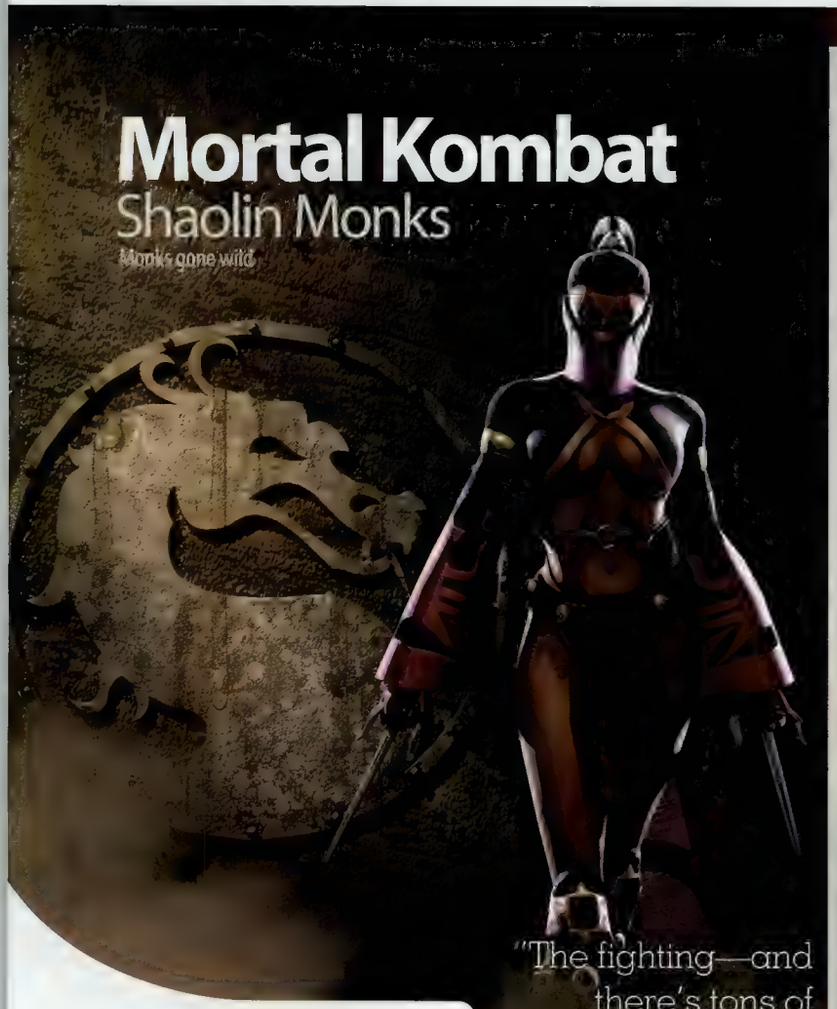


The cinemas only accentuate the malevolent character design.



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Mortal Kombat
Shaolin Monks
Monks gone wild



"The fighting—and there's tons of it—never grows laborious or monotonous..."

Even if Shaolin Monks completely fell apart after the first few minutes, it'd be worth owning as an example of how badly almost every other developer is botching the most fundamental aspect of game creation: character interaction—the current bane of 3D game design. But 2D responsiveness, fluidity and precision control over seamless 3D models is just the tip of the iceberg in Shaolin Monks, in concert with a host of other devices that gel just as, or nearly as, well. Not only is this the pinnacle of the MK franchise, but, in my opinion, the best game Midway has ever put out (and I say that having spent the fighting-game wars with my tent pitched in Capcom's camp). As much as I like the MK universe, the characters have always felt a bit stiff to me. When it came to 3D fighting, Killer Instinct was my poison.

This particular Outworld excursion—brought to you by Shao Lin when he decides to break the rules of Mortal Kombat and invade Earth Realm sans tournament—finds either Liu Kang, Kung Lao, or both in Ko-Op mode, beating the unliving hell out of assorted indigenous nether-beasts along with various core zealots in search of their lost allies and ultimately Lin's demise. But the path out of hell is one steeped in MK mythology (no pun intended), and so things are seldom as they appear...at least from Kang and Lao's perspectives.

Working from Goro's Lair and Earth Realm (Wu-Shi Academy) en route to the game's portal laden core hub—the floating Outworld Monastery—the locales run the gamut of MK haunts. Far-off silhouettes of serrated steeples under the purple skies of the Wasteland...the pitch gloom of the Living Forest...Soul Tombs, Netherrealm, and Foundry are all brought to fitting panoramic life, yet the producers never debase our trek with silly arrows or markers pointing the way, to-do lists, or prods of any kind beyond the events that drive the story. It's up to the player where to venture, much like Metroid Prime, with which it shares similar modes of progression. Through a constantly mounting arsenal of combos, specials, fatalities, and platforming moves, paths once blocked are made passable in concert with the game's kill puzzles (as a rule, where there is a means for gruesome death there lies a way forward) and the flawless kombat. The fighting—and there's tons of it—never grows laborious or monotonous via an array of ultra-intuitive air maneuvers, wall runs, combos, throws, fatalities and juggles that truly set a benchmark, accentuated by trademark MK devices; knocking creatures into ravenous trees, numerous blood draining or chunking apparatus, pools of acid, conveniently placed incinerators, corpse-launching catapults, and of course those lovely MK spikes adorn every region. The boss battles can be epic too. Sure, there are those token battles against all too familiar foes, but there are plenty of surprises too, such as rescuing Mileena from her evil clone Kitana, or dealing with Reptile's giant serpent in an environmental platforming challenge before sealing his doom. And then there are, of course, the weapons: There are few things cooler than the sight of Kung Lao lugging around a 4-foot long blade, let alone launching victims into the air before splitting them in to bloody halves. And if 3D camera snafus get you down, fear not; Close, Normal and PoP-like Panoramic views let you have it your way. There's even a touch of toasty MK humor such as Scorpion going down T2 style or running up to a monk Baraka's just skewered through the chest and brain and asking "are you alright?"

Part Metroid, part Tomb Raider, part Devil May Cry and all Mortal Kombat, Shaolin Monks is about as bloody good as adventure gaming gets. My desire for a Street Fighter or Killer Instinct action-adventure game has just reached critical mass. Dave Halverson

Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks — 8.5 Score

PlayStation 2, Xbox

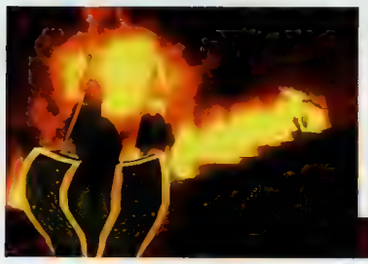
Extras galore on top of a good 9–10 hour game, especially in ko-op mode, excellent voice acting, superb graphics.

I like the original, more decrepit Raiden. This young buff version isn't getting it done for me. He looks like he belongs in X-Men.

Developer: Midway **Publisher:** Midway
Online: None **Available:** September







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PlayStation.2

TEEN
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Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence
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Ratchet
DEADLOCKED

Meaner and leaner

Gleemon Vox is in need of heros, but not that typical save-the-galaxy-from-evil-domination need. Being the ratings-hungry intergalactic media mogul that he is, and a bit evil, Mr. Vox steals world saviors to compete in his deadly underground gladiatorial competition known as Dreadzone. Ratchet's the next contestant, kidnapped for the show to battle it out in arenas of robot death and destruction.

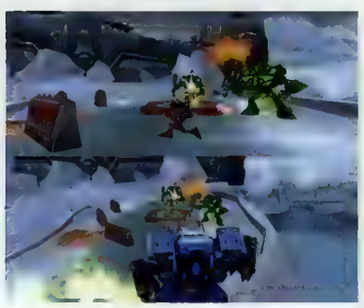
What, no Clank? Ratchet's trusty sidekick has been left to tool around home-base prison, where Ratchet returns periodically after claiming victory over a specific planet before opening up the next wave of competitions. It's a good time for the humorous announcers to take a few pot-shots as well, and a good time for Insomniac to assault us with their sharp writing.

In place of Clank and his more platforming-centric abilities are a pair of destroyer bots, who are constantly by your side, deployed to help with such tasks as direct combat, igniting nodes, placing grind wires and other helpful devices like EMP grenades that bring down shields. While there are a few sections that require jumps, grinds, climbs and other staple series mechanics, Ratchet: Deadlocked mostly hinges on its manic, ceaseless action. Vehicles continually come into play, from lumbering tank-like behemoths to speedy hover bikes, and a lot the weapons you've become accustomed to are available for purchase, gradually upgrading through experience and open to modifications.



The world environment has been replaced with compartmentalized, quick-playing action stretches that are varied and intensely chaotic. Don't think of them as arenas as much a more complex, broadly structured levels—a more abrupt way of packaging the still-familiar Ratchet and Clank gameplay. Online, all the single-player and co-op missions are available for highly customizable, ten-player bouts. Capture the flag and deathmatch are fun enough, but the siege-like juggernaut and crazy king of the hill quickly became my favorite. The deepest of the bunch is the conquest mode, which is an extension of the siege mode from Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal where you capture groups of nodes.

The single-player campaign is long and satisfying, allaying any worries that Ratchet: Deadlocked abandoned the series roots for all-out multiplayer. There's a sense that Insomniac wanted to go out with a quick, clean fourth installment without too much hassle and strain. It may be time for the series to retire, but any fan would be remiss to stay away from a possible final hurrah. Brady Fiechter









Ratchet: Deadlocked — 8.5 Score

PlayStation 2

Alpha and Omega mods add to weapon strategies, strong new direction for the series

Doesn't feel as robust as past Ratchet & Clank games

Developer: Insomniac **Publisher:** SCEA
Online: 10-player **Available:** October



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Shadow of the Colossus

A moving adventure

How endlessly we kill our adversaries, paying no attention to intent or consequence. Guns fire, bombs explode, fists and swords crack their mark over and over again, piling up death after death, and we move on to the next stop. The best game violence is engaging and fun, intense and strategic, but it is possible to feel something beyond the mundane when we're confronting our adversary. Shadow of Colossus understands this. It is a game of tremendous emotion, of sadness and exhilaration, tragedy and wonder. You stare into the eyes of its giant adversaries and see a presence staring back, as worthy of survival as the character you've become. What a special experience this is.

The colossi dwell in various regions of the magnificent world you've entered, scattered about to be discovered as you ride your horse, Agro, over the vast landscape. There's a myth that their spilled essence contains the power of resurrection. A person very dear to you is lying on an alter in the center of their home, and she must receive this life-giving sacrifice.

You will kill these beautiful beings, with no real understanding as to their existence, and this is part of Shadow of the Colossus' emotional resonance. It is a game of mystery and the mystical, communicating through the spirit of discovery in a way its predecessor ICO did before it. The game plays out in the depths of your imagination, binding you to grand visions that truly must be seen: The awesome serpent who takes you through the sky as you struggle to stay on its back. The towering giant of stone and moss who sweeps his club into the surrounding temple, bringing the support beams crashing down so that you can jump to its back hundreds of feet from the ground. A colossi so enormous, his one hand holds you in its palm like a tiny bug, grasping at its back as you thrust your sword into its vitals.



The scale of the colossi is awesome.



"It is a game of tremendous emotion, of sadness and exhilaration, tragedy and wonder."

Every colossi has its weak point, which must be reached by perilous platforming as the creature moves its powerful form to shake you. Before you can find a point of attachment to climb its back, the creature must be lulled into a compromising position by some thrilling, creative approach, from causing debilitating damage to breaking armor points to irritation by bow-and-arrow shots.

This can be frustrating at times, for a number of reasons that come down to camera quirks, clunky movements, a confusion of direction. There is an ambition and scope to Shadow of the Colossus that has never been attempted, and the PS2, combined with a shaky reach by the gamemakers, can strain to fully tighten the threads to such an artistic tapestry. When the game leaves you wanting, it turns right around and overflows with its next compelling moment. Like ICO before it, Shadow of the Colossus exists in a different place. It's a game you ponder long after the experience has ended. Brady Fiechter

Shadow of the Colossus

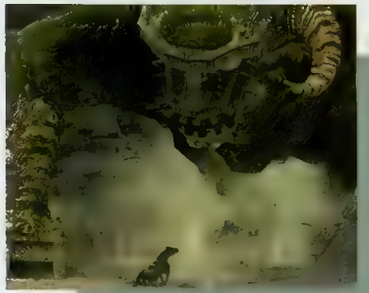
9.0 Score

PlayStation 2

The way the colossi animate, the way they contain presence is evocative

Hardware holds the game down

Developer: SCEI **Publisher:** SCEA
Online: None **Available:** October



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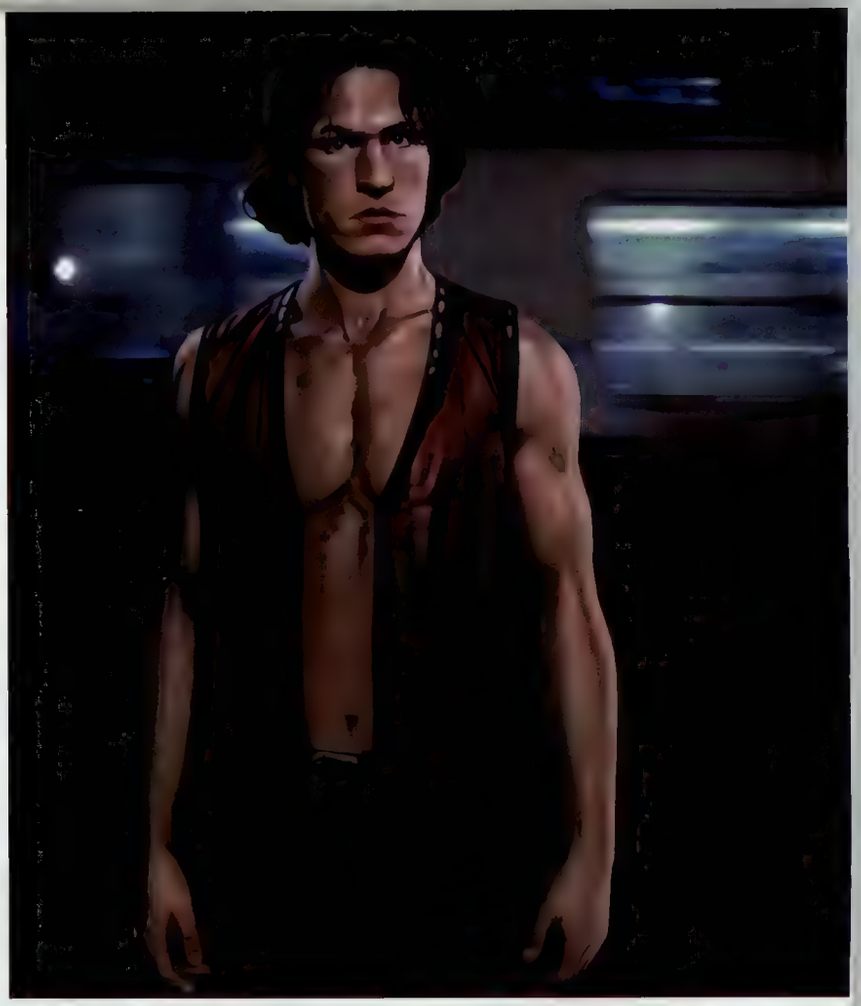
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The Warriors

Warriors come out to play. Bloodily.



For every man, woman, and child under the sun who has yearned to bounce a brick off the skull of a mime, Rockstar has generously provided The Warriors. Brutally stark and unflinchingly violent, Warriors does not so much cross the line as it does pick up it and move it about 15 feet into previously untouchable territory. Yet its violence remains very much in context and, more to the point, is deftly handled, with the final product heralding something entirely new for Rockstar Games.

A homage to both the 1979 Walter Hill cult-classic film and beat-'em-ups such as Final Fight and Double Dragon, Warriors is set amid a New York City beset by gang warfare. As the titular Warriors, players take to the streets to carve out an empire among the boarded-up storefronts and frightened citizenry. Their primary weapons are intimidation and the clenched fist. Their mission requires them to rob and mug, to take from the weak to give to the dealers. To keep their credibility intact, they must spraypaint the walls and stomp the hell out of anything that moves. These Warriors are, as singer Kim Wilde once noted, the kids in America. And they are mad as hell.

Cinematic and immersive, Warriors succeeds because it wholly engrosses players. Its New York becomes the most violent playground on Earth with turf to be divided, rumbles fought, and brutal challenges won or lost. A combination of splendid art direction, game structure, and storyline combine to make this possible. It all works, almost seamlessly, to bring Hill's vision to consoles.

Brawlers live and die based on the strength of their fighting, and Warriors thrives on it. Two gameplay buttons are used to issue light and heavy attacks, and a third button handles grapples. From this





"Cinematic and immersive, Warriors succeeds because it wholly engrosses players."

basic framework, the game allows for a diversity of moves and defenses. Two- and three-button taps create punch and kick combinations. Once properly thrown, tackled, or smashed to the floor, enemies can be mounted and duly punished. The game includes a wealth of weapons to pick up in the environments: planks, garbage cans, bottles, bricks. Other implements of destruction such as shivs, cleavers, bats, and brass knuckles can be won, bought, taken from foes, or stolen from stores. Context-based moves provide additional depth; A Warrior can, say, grab an enemy and then decorate a nearby wall with an oval-shaped crimson stain where the fool's head was slammed.

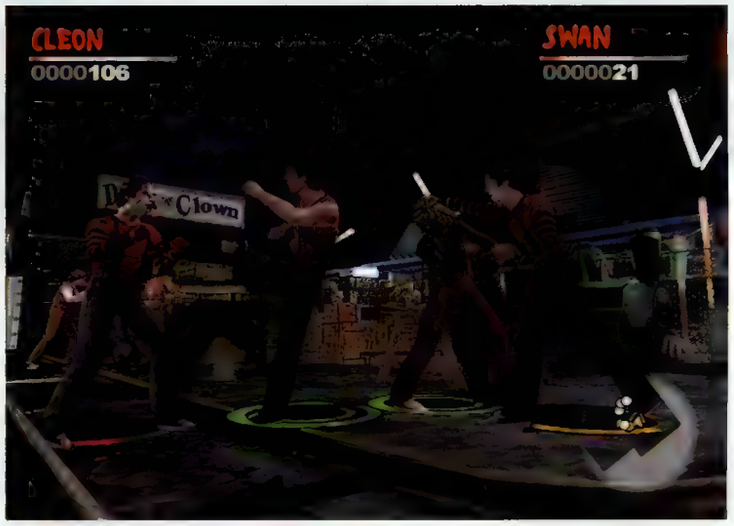
It's not daunting, this control scheme. Players of all skill sets will be able to quickly get the hang of fighting and in minutes the brawling becomes almost second nature, with no real need to worry about which button does what or fretting over the prospect of pulling off a complex series of button presses to perform a special move, It does this without sacrificing depth or dumbing things down; although the game allows button mashers to progress and perhaps even prosper, it rewards the skilled player in subtle ways. Offensive is ever emphasized, but blocks and counters can quickly turn the tide of a streetfight. Employing combinations and a wide range of moves allows for faster replenishment of a Warrior's rage meter that can be activated to allow for more potent attacks. Tandem moves provide flash and pain, and the game punctuates a lot of its special attacks with brief slow-motion segments showing, in great detail, the strike and the resultant blood spray from the victim.

Combat requires players to wade through groups of foes, a sea of arms, elbows, knees, and fists. Gang warfare means a frenzy of bodies, and the possibility for characters to be flanked, surrounded, and quickly beaten to a pulp. Fights are tense and anxious affairs where confusion reigns, and there's a wonderful sense of adrenaline-churning danger to be had.

The storyline, which begins before the events of the Warriors film, builds the tension with each new mission, leading characters up to an apocalyptic meeting in The Bronx. Warriors begins every new mission by introducing the setting and by counting down to the meeting and the message is very clear—there is no escape











from destiny. Missions explaining the gang's origins help flesh out the picture, and Rockstar sees fit to include some of its best gameplay here. In one of these optional missions, two would-be Warrior recruits must compete against a series of gangs in a king of the hill-style challenge to prove their worthiness. It's silly, sure, but it's also remarkably fun.

All this plays out among a series of spectacularly muted game worlds. Hill's vision of New York is dark and muddy, with browns and grays painting the town. Flashes of color come from gang-decorated walls and facades hint that once upon a time, these places may have been worth visiting. Coney Island emerges, alternately, as a fine place to get beaten up in or be depressed by. This is because Rockstar did its homework—Coney Island was once a pleasure kingdom that degenerated into a sewer that further devolved into a s---hole. Even the landmarks, the brilliantly lit Wonder Wheel with its rocking and sliding cars and the world-famous Cyclone rollercoaster (both liberally featured here), do nothing to mute the bad vibes.

With all the elements in place, Rockstar ratchets up the violence. Blood sprays everywhere. It erupts when saps gets pulped by trains and soars gracefully when Warriors slows down the action to show the results the aforementioned mime's head being struck by a brick. It splatters when the back of a victim's head gets repeatedly jackhammered against the streets. There's a disturbing squelching noise when a broken bottle gets thrust into flesh. Screams and moans of anguish litter the battlefields, and fallen enemies writhe and shudder as they attempt to crawl away from death. This is not a Sunday picnic, not even one in Hell. Still, Warriors perfectly captures the desperation and danger involved with street fighting, and does so without the tiniest bit of sugarcoating.

Only a few small blemishes mar Warriors. Rockstar does brutality exceedingly well. To date, its attempts at stealth-based gameplay have been as clumsy as a three-legged snowdog, and Warriors continues this thread. Cops will stand two feet away from gang members hidden in special shaded areas and will neither see anything nor bother to investigate. Dull chase scenes hammering home the notion that this gang really is an island unto itself require the Warriors to flee from rival gangs far too often. Minor camera issues ensure that bodies or obstacles will obscure a fight's action, forcing a perspective readjustment at the least welcome time.

In sinking to the depths of gang violence, Warriors soars. It's a shining example of how to do a game based on a movie; it pays proper respect without adhering slavishly to the source material. And man, is it fun to play.

Bravo. Greg Orlando

The Warriors — **9.0** Score

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Excellent fighting and brawling; great unlockable modes; gratuitously violent toward mimes and clowns

Dull missions interspersed with the good ones; occasional problems disengaging from combat; Andy Gibb music

Developer: Rockstar Toronto **Publisher:** Rockstar Games
Online: None **Available:** October

Castlevania
Curse of Darkness

Cue the creatures, start the symphony...The 3D Castlevania we've waited for has finally arrived



Advancing through the third installment of Castlevania in 3D, it's undeniable how proficient the core CV team (Igarashi, Kojima, and Yamane) have become at the art of monster-disposal-based adventure gaming. Not because the game is bursting with innovation, but because it's not. Once again they have been able to take one of the most rudimentary concepts in gaming, born of the 8-bit era, and by sheer technique in the areas of world and creature design, control and music, create something utterly mesmerizing. In every area Lament failed Curse's subtle differences make it excel.

So skilled are Iga and Co. at capturing the very essence of their simple contrivance that it's all one can do to pause for nourishment and bathroom breaks; which is certainly an altogether more difficult task working in 3D. In 2D, Castlevania draws from a much deeper goblet, incorporating grappling, assorted platforming, more focused battles, and Metroid style level progression, but in 3D, everything pretty much revolves around combat, ambience, and story; three areas where Curse literally beams.

A tale of two Devil Forgemasters: Hector, whose betrayal of Dracula left him open for the Belmonts' fatal blow, and Isaac, his humiliated equal now bent on making him pay dearly. Along the way Hector will meet minions within Vallachia on either side of the conflict (including Trevor Belmont looking all set for his PS3 debut) but the mission, as in all Castlevanias, is crystal clear: Kill the source and you kill the curse...Europe is dying; time to save the day.

Just as the condiments define the burger (meat and bread anyone?) the tools of the demon-hunting trade define Curse. But you can forget dashing lanterns to gather hearts for throwing assorted weapons. Hearts are gobbled up by Castlevania's answer to Tamagochi called Innocent Devils, and after Curse I can't imagine a Castlevania without them. Essentially pet monsters you forge and evolve throughout the game, they lend shield, power, flight, healing, and special abilities that can turn the tide in any battle, not to mention how great they look and how fun to mature. The other









Remember those first screens? Here's where this boss really lives and breathes…fire!









great device in Curse is "combining" using found elements to continually upgrade your weapons and armor. No more saving up for that pricey mace. Found elements throughout the game strengthen armor, spear, mallet, club, sword, and fist. And what you don't need you can sell just in case you need a potion or two…and you will.

The creatures in Curse—possibly the best in terms of both design and form the series has ever seen—are the stuff of 8-and 16-bit dreams; each and every one pattern-based, forcing the player to use strategy at every turn. Blatant hacking and slashing is not an option.

Above all however, what struck me most about Curse was how much it felt like the old school Simon's Quest-era Castlevania in 3D, traversing miles of country beyond the confines of the castle into the forest, surrounding mountainside, and grounds. Vallachia is absolutely enormous; the castle a gigantic network of towering gothic corridors and chambers reaching down into the bowels of the earth and out to the surrounding countryside.

Above all, Iga and Co. know where Castlevania fans' buttons lie and exactly how and when to press them, which is why they can continue to layer subtle details over the basic design and score hit after hit; something few brands this long in the tooth could ever dream of getting away with. Behind all the gameplay…all the code, and all those wonderful Castlevania bosses, two things really drive this franchise; the music, which is always an extension of itself, and the simple art of set dressing: All they do is sit there but any Castlevania fan knows they're like old friends. Candelabra, skulls, old bones, flickering wax candles, stained glass, stacks of old tomes, torches, giant pillars of stone, long flowing red drapes, ornate iron fences, gothic fountains, empty cathedrals, marble floors…there's nothing subtle about it. This is our monster movie.

"Above all, Iga and Co. know where Castlevania fans' buttons lie and exactly how and when to press them..."

Dracula didn't just live here; he decorated the place. The amazing creatures are what make the game live, but they're nothing without Castlevania gothic.

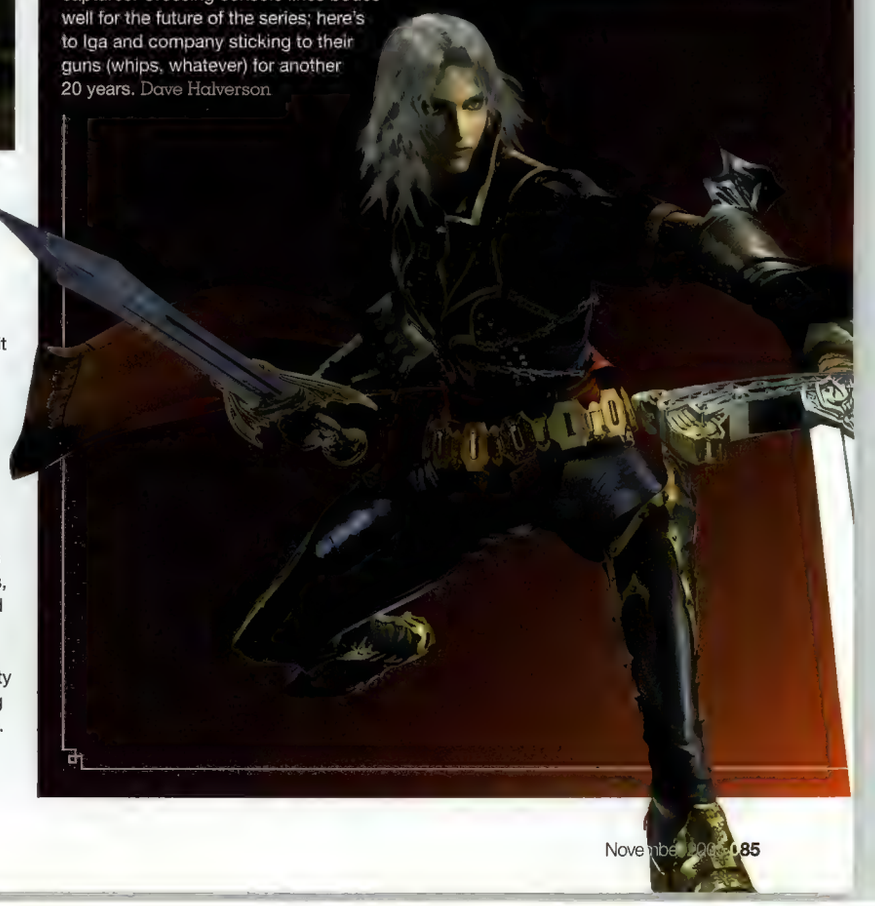
Between the Xbox and PS2, the anti-aliasing of course makes a huge difference and the Xbox game is pretty much load free (although the PS2 doesn't load too badly) but texture- and model-wise, they're identical, although the added resolution makes everything look that much better on Xbox as you can see in these lovely screen captures. Crossing console lines bodes well for the future of the series; here's to Iga and company sticking to their guns (whips, whatever) for another 20 years. Dave Halverson

Castlevania: Curse of Darkness
Xbox, PlayStation 2
9.0
Score

Gorgeous, ever-evolving, and absolutely impossible to put down. Epic bosses and beautiful cinemas.

Hector's walk needs work, he has a tendency to slip off targets in mid-combo (needs a lock-on) and I wish he had Alucard's grace.

Developer: Konami **Publisher:** Konami
Online: None **Available:** October





Far Cry Instincts

A fantastic closing to the first-person empire on Xbox

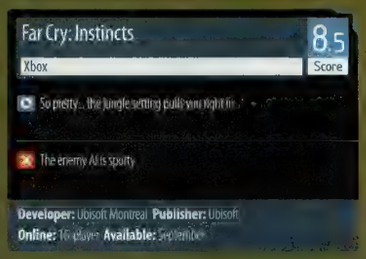
Separating one first-person shooter from the next on Xbox has mostly come down to quality of implementation over richness of fresh ideas, but Far Cry: Instincts manages to be that rare achievement that feels nicely removed from the pack. It's an extension of last year's acclaimed PC title, unplayed by me, but now I see what all the fuss was about.

Moving around a brisk, workable story involving mercenaries and a missing journalist, the game places you in the role of Jack Carver, an unhinged tough guy whose basic motives are survival. And surviving is more than the effective strength of your typical assortments of firearms.

Jack's a bit more beast than human, possessing feral abilities that enhance sight, sound, and strength, all growing in use and becoming more honed as the mission deepens. Stealthier kills come into play as you begin to track the enemy's scent, slicing them from behind with a handy hunting knife, rushing them with a nasty animal-like swipe that sends them flying. Night vision comes into play, and tracking an enemy to lay a trap is even possible. The game doesn't go as far as you might hope with the enemy intelligence and creative gameplay structure, but the more open play does reach an excellent level of engagement.

High praise goes to the fantastic island setting, which takes the Xbox to its perceived limits and plays off a all sorts of slick visual tricks and stirring designs. Foliage just never looks very good in games, but here the dense growth is encompassing and impressively organic. That you actually move around and interact with so much of what you're seeing maintains a compellingly convincing world. The excellent sound effects and environmental noises complete the mood.

Far Cry: Instincts takes all this online, of course, offering the basics of deathmatch, steal the flag type scenarios, team play and the like. The map editor is fairly robust, a standout that true fans of the game will love sinking their teeth into. If this is the last of its kind on Xbox, Far Cry: Instincts is a great way to go out. Brady Fiechter

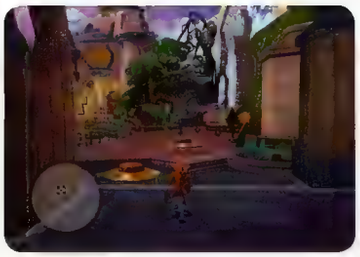


"High praise goes to the fantastic island setting, which takes the Xbox to its perceived limits..."



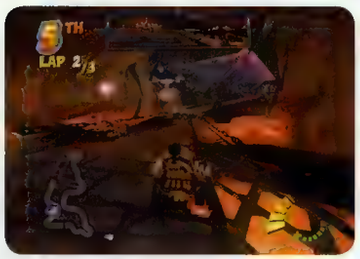


From effects to details to lighting, the game looks spectacular.



CRASH TAG TEAM RACING

Try not to crash, bandicoot





"...massive action constructs packed with action puzzles, cause and effect mayhem..."

Cause and effect vignettes liven up each themed world.

Cart racing—a.k.a. the place where brands go to either die or transition—is a fairly simple formula where three core elements—course design, handling nuances, and power ups—converge for either big fun, as in Mario Kart or Diddy Kong Racing, or token bile such as Antz Extreme Racing or Super Bombad Racing (talk about your bad omens; bomb and bad right in the title). How well a given developer can balance these core elements accounts for pretty much the whole enchilada when it comes to zipping around in tiny carts firing assorted projectiles at your fellow racers. We all know the drill: There are few things worse than speeding toward the finish line after 3 laps of meticulous power sliding and weapons dispersal only to have a homing missile rammed up your arse at the last second. It's almost as annoying as being so far out in the lead that you feel like you need to slow down to have any fun. But even in the case Radical got everything right, does the world really need another current-gen cart racer? I imagine Radical asked themselves that very question when they got the nod to take over the Crash franchise…beginning with the series' second cart racer. "Okay people we're making…a cart racer; lets have some ideas" How they came up with a theme park run by a maniacal gear head hosting a tournament emceed by a pair of chickens I do not know, but it's certainly a great place to start. What really makes CTTR click however is the insane amalgam of gameplay on tap and 'clashing', the best thing to happen to cart racing since the shoulder tap power slide. By fusing together with the closest competitor you can leave the driving to say Nina Cortex (toon gothic, gotta love her) while you man the turret until the ammo runs dry. When and how long to clash is the essential ingredient in the racing dynamic along with all of the usual cart racing accoutrements, all of which are in here and done right. Von Clutch's twisted amusement park also serves as a massive interactive hub from which character specific tasks are doled out to unlock cars, racers, and upgrades linked to the actual themed worlds themselves, which amount to massive action constructs packed with action puzzles, cause and effect mayhem, interactive lunacy, and a variety of race types including stunt tracks, battle arenas, and 4-5 different modes per course that run the gamut of vehicular mayhem. The end result is a massive funtopia where the Crash universe's new found dementia (VU is wise to continue the series' Looney Tunes on crack direction) can run completely amok. The action isn't what you'd call fine-tuned (Crash's controls are a little skatey and the camera jams quite a bit) but as a side order of fun the hubs pack a wallop, adding immeasurably to the overall experience. The old cart racing mold has (finally) been broken…make that shattered. Dave Halverson



Crash Tag Team Racing — 7.5 Score

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PSP, DS

Unlike any cart racer you've ever played, loaded with sight gags, humor, and a truly bent (in a great way) soundtrack.

The action hubs lack polish and the graphics are of average PS2 quality across the board, so no bells or whistles for the GC or Xbox versions.

Developer: Radical Entertainment **Publisher:** VU Games
Online: None **Available:** October

Without Warning

We've been sent to issue all you people here a warning...



Security guard Dave Wilson may well be the world's first brain transplant candidate. At one point in the third-person adventure cum shoot-'em-up Without Warning, Wilson finds himself in a locked room, shooting it out, a desperate last stand against a series of terrorists. He waxes philosophically that someone should restore power, thus allowing him to pass safely through the electronically sealed door penning him in.

Wilson, it might be noted, is shooting out at the terrorists through a series of large windows. On the first floor. It might also be noted, solely for the sake of belaboring the obvious, that Wilson is an idiot who should stop waiting for power to be restored to doors when he might more easily climb through an oversized and open window.

When idiots attack, the result can only be Without Warning... Terrorists with rocket launchers close to point-blank range before firing so as to kill themselves, their allies, and maybe a special forces operative or two. When they say they're going to execute hostages, these same villains really mean they're going to run out blindly and fire their guns everywhere but at the bound people at their feet.

Testosterone carries Warning. It does not carry it very far, nor very fast. Players take the role of six different characters, four with an aggressive bent and two who are more inclined to run than fight. The emphasis has been clearly placed on shooting the bad guys and the explosive barrels they love to stand near. Most missions require copious amounts of bloodshed before they can be completed, and it's easy enough to use a lock-on feature to compensate for the spastic, jittery control scheme that makes targeting an impressive challenge.

In combat, enemies do take cover, but will stay behind boxes even when flanked and fired upon. Combat doesn't really require much in the way of strategy, although later levels provide an increased terrorist presence to allow for the possibility of getting hit from multiple directions. Run-and-gun tactics can be used throughout with little ill-effect and Warning trods across no new ground in the action-shooter genre. It does provide a neat effect where the screen flashes red and shakes accordingly enough to disorient a player when a character gets hit, but this is faint praise indeed.

Minigames break up the action, with minimal memory skills and a hearty appreciation for the obvious being the prerequisites for beating. One lockpicking challenge demands players identify the length of tumblers and then push them up accordingly. This is not brain surgery. It is not even mopping the floors after a particularly gruesome brain surgery. Warning gleefully throws these puzzles up time and again, and only changes its tack when it's time to have some hapless character schlep from A to B looking for a keycard.

A branching and converging storyline weaves the individual perspectives together. Characters will revisit areas others have already traveled and perform actions to aid their comrades. It's one of the game's commandos who turns on the juice to free Wilson from his locked-door prison, and the coming together of the continuity makes for some interesting happenings. It's also entirely too little too late, given Warning's basic disregard for man as the thinking animal. Greg Orlando

"Testosterone carries Warning. It does not carry it very far, nor very fast."





Kinda like Duck Hunt... only not.







The Suffering
Ties That Bind

Drug addicts and serial killers... all in a day's work for our man Torque









Enemies go down in big chunks...

"...as much story-driven dread as it is explicit doom and gloom."

The Suffering: Ties That Bind is as much brutal, ceaseless action as it is psychological horror, as much story-driven dread as it is explicit doom and gloom. It mostly succeeds on all levels, mining for more depth than the first game while getting a little caught up in its own misplaced ambitions. I gravitate towards this type of game and Ties That Bind is a good one.

Once again, you play through the first- and third-person eyes of Torque, a convicted murderer who may or may not have been responsible for the death of his wife and son. He seems to be a decent man at heart, yet a man who has made some regretful mistakes in his life, and the price he pays is slowly revealed as the story unfolds. It's involving, the way you start to see Torque's psyche exposed, the way his haunted past takes shape in the game's world. The windup is more satisfying than the payoff, hints of a more resonant tale are left to crumble in missed opportunities, but through the violence and gore is a connection to the character that can leave a mark.

The creatures Torque encounters are certainly a highlight, revealed as manifestations of urban horrors and criminal brutalities. They don't move as frighteningly as they look on first impression, but that's not to say the action doesn't keep us charged. The downfall comes when too much is going at once, leaving the simplistic combat to grind on your patience where a more involved mode of character interaction would have helped.

The morality system returns from the first game, going further in its pursuit to alter the course of the game and our choice of personal involvement. I can see where the developers were going with it, and I like the idea that it affects the way Torque transforms into his beast form, but the path isn't sharply defined; it's more of a workable idea than an effective tool that leaves a lasting impression.

Dreadfully fictionalized slums of Baltimore are effectively envisioned in Ties That Bind. It's a place you're not surprised to see inhabited by villains who skate on knives attached to their feet and dirty needles stuck in their flesh. When it all comes off slightly undercooked, it's not for lack of strong ingredients. The Suffering: Ties That Bind is a satisfying sequel.

Brady Fiechter

The Suffering: Ties That Bind — **8.0** Score

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

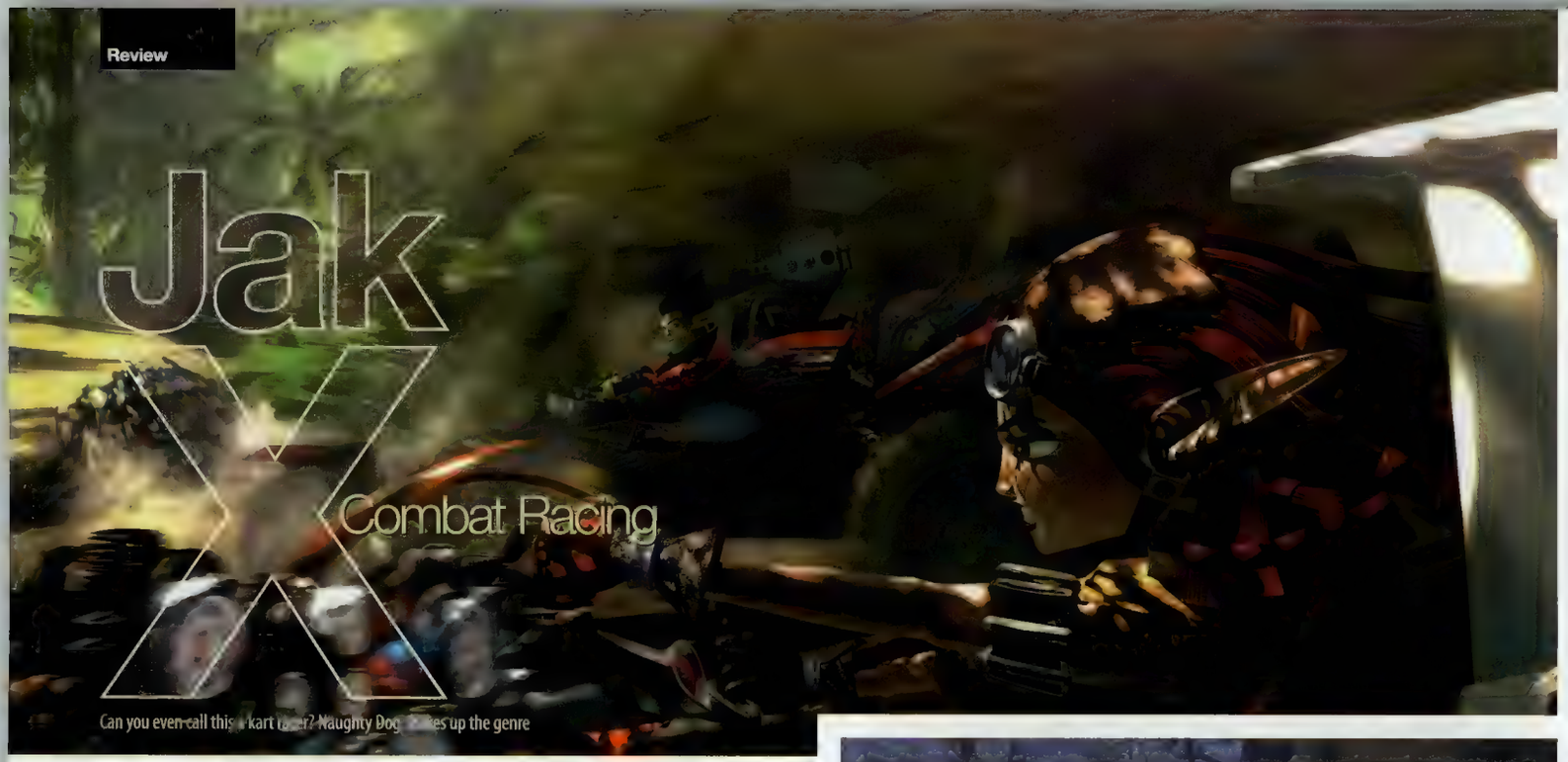
Good action, strong sense of character, looks good

Can try too hard to shock, just comes off forced

Developer: Surreal Software **Publisher:** Midway
Online: None **Available:** September



Jak X
Combat Racing



Can you even call this a kart racer? Naughty Dog shakes up the genre

Jak and his obnoxiously abrasive sidekick Daxter have made a laudable decision: trade in the adventures of saving the world on foot for the fresh thrills of saving the world while racing buggies. Or rather, recklessly careening buggies through wildly treacherous courses while blasting the competition off the track with high-powered weapons. Jak X: Combat Racing is the best thing to happen to the genre on PS2. In fact, it's pretty much its own unique brand of kart racing.

So the music's flat, the character banter needs to be livened up, the breaks for an annoyingly strapped-on story are a waste of resources. The game excels in too many ways to stall from the dead weight.

A variety of combat fields is a big part of the appeal. Dominating the competitions are four major modes of play: the traditional straight-forward race to the finish line; arena deathmatch, which takes on a growing complexity as you climb the class ladder; open field search and destroy, dominated by collection runs; and the simple but deceptively effective destroyer runs, where you drive head on into traffic, taking out as many drone vehicles as possible, gaining point multipliers for every lap finished. Grand Prixs come into play to provide trips to the next class, and, as in all the various competitions, there are tons of wrinkles thrown into each type of playing field that gives the game an unprecedented level of variety. Everyone will come away with their favorite types of racing modes, but even when you're locked into the weakest of the competitions, the scope of it all really does complete the experience.

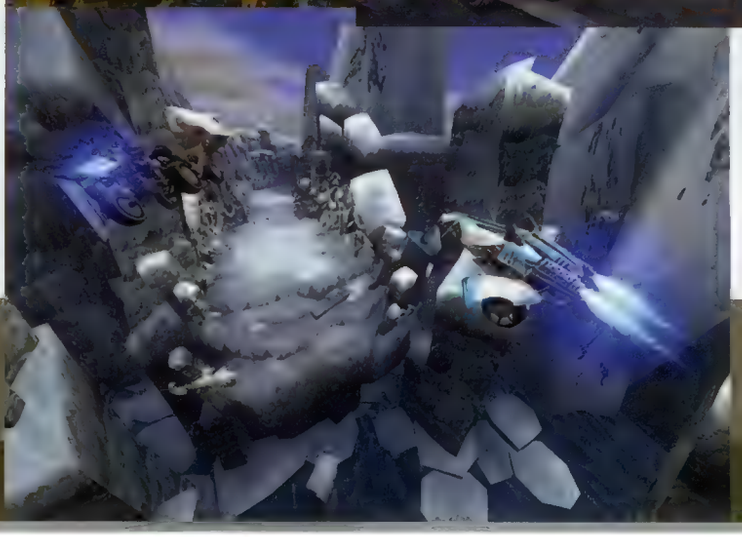
Naughty Dog has remained faithful to the durable touches veterans will keen in on, like the cheap kills, beneficial timing starts and the delightfully maddening, incessant position changes that play out to the climactic end. The big hook to the racers is the sophisticated physics model, which widely differentiates each modified machine and adds a growing gameplay engagement as the speeds and tracks intensify. Jak X doesn't show its true form til you climb into the more advanced classes, finding satisfying racing lines and new modes of strategy. Take all this online for one of the more newly fun experiences for the modern console, and you've got one evolved combat racer indeed.

Brady Fiechter





Few do real-time cinemas like Naughty Dog.



"Jak X: Combat Racing is the best thing to happen to the genre on PS2."

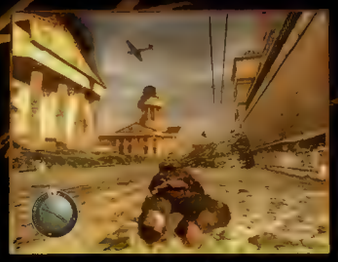
DESTINY HAS CHOSEN ITS MESSENGER

"Sniper Elite™ takes combat to the next level."
-IGN

"9 out of 10"
- PSM

ONE BULLET CAN CHANGE HISTORY

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REALISTIC SNIPING WITH ADJUSTMENTS FOR GRAVITY, WIND, HEART RATE AND MORE.



28 SINGLE PLAYER AND CO-OPERATIVE MISSIONS.



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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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Intense Violence

namco

The way it's meant to be played
NVIDIA

REBELLION

PlayStation.2

POWERED BY gamespy

ONLINE
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SOFTWARE

Review Gallery



Battalion Wars

GameCube

Developer: Kuju **Publisher:** Nintendo **Online:** None **Available:** September

9.0 Score

Not only is Advanced Wars Dual Strike one of the very best games of the year but now it's being joined by the quintessential military action/RTS for GC. Commanding all manner of troops like a real-time Cannon Fodder, and piloting assorted vehicles has never been even close to this much fun, or this beautifully executed. It's a background turner, but the character design and animation are absolutely brilliant as is the flow of the game and integrated (decidedly comic book) story, taking us from one war (the Western front vs. the Tundran territories) to the next as the two must band together to stop the maniacal Kaiser Vlad and his gas breathing Xylvanian Army. Now this is the kind of war I can get behind. Dave Halverson



"...the character design and animation are absolutely brilliant"



Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: [illegible]

Publisher: [illegible]

Online: None

Available: September

7.0 Score

Fans of this claymation series will be overjoyed at this fun little foray into the world of that wacky inventor Wallace and his dog Gromit. You'll also be able to play as Hutch, one of Gromit's bunny buddies. You'll only get to control Hutch at night, though; switching day and night by activating sundials is imperative to solving the mystery of the were-rabbits. Using a wide (and weird) variety of weapons like the Bun-Gun, Bolt Cutters, and a Lady Were-Rabbit Decoy (how's that for creative?) the threesome must rid their town of evil were-rabbits that terrorize the place when the sun goes down. A delightful movie game that's sure to satisfy. Ashley Esqueda



Karaoke Revolution Party

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: [illegible]

Publisher: [illegible]

Online: [illegible]

Available: [illegible]

7.5 Score

If you're tired of singing in the shower and want to move your warbling into the living room, Karaoke Revolution Party's here to help gain the attention of the opposite sex. Adding to the kitschy playlist is a new mode that gets you off your tookus and onto a dance mat. If singing in tune wasn't hard enough, Konami's plopped in simultaneous dancing, making you bust a move while you belt out Beyonce. With downloadable songs, mini-games that are as fun as they are totally weird, and really cool customizable avatars with EyeToy, we only have one question: Are you ready to rock? Ashley Esqueda



Low on energy? Check out that gargantuan ham bone!

Capcom Classics Collection

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom **Online:** None **Available:** September 27

8.0 Score

Arcade collections come and go, most of them filled with far too many once fond but now painful memories of how shite we had it growing up. Not so with Capcom CC. Sure there are a few painful reminders in here...This is the Street Fighter that started it all? But hey, Ghost 'n' Goblins, Ghouls 'n' Ghosts and Super Ghouls 'n' Ghosts on one disc? That's just too much love for you and me. Add Mercs, Forgotten Worlds, Final Fight, 1943, Kai and Bionic Commando and you've got yourself some choice old school. Three things missing though: Strider, Willow and NES Bionic Commando. I know it's not "arcade" but it smokes the arcade version. Still...no Strider? C'mon! Dave Halverson

"Ghost 'n' Goblins, Ghouls 'n' Ghosts and Super Ghouls 'n' Ghosts on one disc? That's just too much love for you and me."



SSX on Tour

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PSP

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** EA Sports Big **Online:** None **Available:** October

8.0 Score

Snow Miser, Mr. White Christmas himself, is duly pleased. The fourth iteration of Electronic Arts' extreme snowboarding series SSX comes with 12 new tracks to plummet down and trick off of, a series of "Shred" races against competitors, and new create-a-character options within the game's World Tour mode. For this go-round, skiing has been added, but this seems largely cosmetic. It's hard to note how, exactly, the board handles differently than the blades during gameplay. No matter; as always, the grinding is good, the tricks are easy enough for a schlub to pull off, and Electronic Arts does a fine job of fleshing everything out with a series of animated pencil line-drawings that jackhammer home the game's exceedingly cool style. Greg Orlando



Chicken Little

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, Game Boy Advance, PC

Dev: Avalanche Software **Pub:** Buena Vista Games **Online:** None **Available:**

8.5 Score

The sky is falling! Actually, Chicken Little's already been through that—now he has to prove to his father (and everyone else) that he's worth his weight in feathers. Teaming up with Chicken Little's motley crew of friends, they set out on a platforming adventure fans of the genre won't soon forget. Each member of the group gets play time, and each have their own unique ability to add to the depth. In addition to the great visuals, many of the actors from the film provided voiceover for this movie game, really selling the experience for people that have seen the film. Who knew kicking arse with a chicken (wielding a yo-yo, no less) could be so super-cool? Ashley Esqueda



Sniper Elite

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Rebellion **Publisher:** Namco **Online:** 2p Multiplayer **Available:** October

7.0 Score

There are two ways to learn the sniper's deadly art. The second method, approved by Namco in its first and third-person World War II adventure Sniper Elite, is more commonly known as trial-and-error or, alternately: I Like To Stop Bullets With My Face. As a sniper at the ass-end of World War II, players creep around a fairly depressing and wrecked Berlin looking for sweet spots to potshot Soviets from and croak from lead poisoning all too often in the process. Elite excels at creating an atmosphere of paranoia and alienation, however; quick flashes of movement in a rifle's scope or through binoculars oftentimes foreshadow an ignominious death, and players are quickly taught caution amid the rubble and ruin. Greg Orlando

"As a sniper at the ass-end of World War II, players creep around a fairly depressing and wrecked Berlin looking for sweet spots..."



Blitz: The League

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Midway **Publisher:** Midway **Online:** 2 Player head-to-head **Available:** Oct.

5.5 Score

At some point, perhaps when the soundtrack blares, "I don't give a f---," over and over, or maybe when the game gleefully lingers over scenes of a wide receiver's bones shattering after a particularly hard hit, or when said player twitches and writhes and screams on-screen before being taken off the field for an injection (also lovingly shown during gameplay) that Blitz: The League crosses the thin line between hardcore and tasteless. Although the venerable pigskin franchise receives a much needed reworking here, the results are uneven at best, potholed by excessive load times as well as an over reliance on a new bullet time-esque Clash mode that unbalances play by slowing time and turning a selected character into a superhuman juggernaut for a spell. Greg Orlando



L.A. Rush

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Midway **Publisher:** Midway **Online:** None **Available:** October 19

7.0 Score

...More like Midnight Club Rush with extra shizzle or whatever you want to call this urban bile everyone is spilling into their games. There is apparently no escape; the token thug booshit just continues to pour out like an airborne virus without a cure, infecting everything in its path. It's a shame too because L.A. Rush still retains some of its old school charm via short cuts and jumps even though it's centered around the "lifestyle" of an L.A. street racer (yeah, right). They do a nice job on the city and the competition de jour is tasty stuff, but it's not like we needed a sequel with so many racing games out there along these lines. If you absolutely positively cannot get enough urban racing Rush does it well, but beware, it's pimped to the max. Dave Halverson



Zatch Bell: Mamado Battles

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Eighting **Publisher:** Bandai **Online:** None **Available:** October

7.0 Score

Hang on to your hats... When genius High-Schooler Kiyo begins to slip at school his dad sends him a strange little boy/doll (in a dress no less) to help straighten him up complete with a red tome of spells which when read aloud conjure a freak show like no other...Hmmm, do I smell yet another Bandai anime-based fighting game? Indeed I do and again it's all that and a trip to the fruity farm, especially in story mode where the Mamado World and the real world collide in two on true Shaman King/InuYasha fashion. Crazy supers, intuitive controls, character customization and great visuals abound but the lack of a jump button bugs me; although Kiyo can throw Zatch into the air. Dave Halverson

"Hmmm, do I smell yet another Bandai anime-based fighting game? Indeed I do and again it's all that and a trip to the fruity farm..."



Tak: The Great JuJu Challenge

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Avalanche **Publisher:** THQ **Online:** None **Available:** September

7.5 Score

What better way to transition Tak from generation to generation than a buddy picture? Once you drag your butt out of the Pupununu pooh-pooh the big bright shining star of co-op racing madness awaits, starring the dim-witted Lok--voiced once again with mad skills by Patrick Warburton (Puddy, The Tick)--and of course Tak. It's the weak and wily meets the dumb and strong as you platform your way across breathtaking jungle locales to win the favor of the Moon JuJu. Expect every trick in the book from mind teasers, to shooting, to all manner of cause end effect platforming along with some of the best co-op gameplay since Dashin' Desperados. Control is still a tad clunky but a super fun game nevertheless. Dave Halverson



Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 3: Night of the Quinkan

PlayStation 2

Developer: Krome Studios **Publisher:** Activision **Online:** None **Available:** October

7.5
Score

Krome know their young audience and really love their little tiger Ty; two things exceedingly evident in Ty 3, a quality romp that capitalizes on what the first two games did best; incorporating the linear treks from Ty along with a scaled-down and refined version of Ty 2's vast universe. The end result is a highly entertaining mini-epic, tailor made for younger blokes and platform fanatics. Although the original game is still my favorite (as much as I like the Quinkan and added diversity) the first Ty was just fab. Ty 3's good fun though and a fitting farewell to our little buddy, for now. I really hope to see him on next-gen in the not so distant future. Something a bit more aboriginal would be nice too...it's definitely time for Ty to get some edge. Dave Halverson





"...a highly entertaining mini-epic, tailor made for younger blokes..."



Ultimate Spiderman

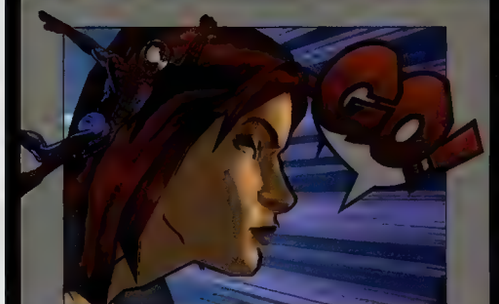
PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Treyarch **Publisher:** Activision **Online:** None **Available:** September

8.0
Score

If nothing else, the story telling in Ultimate Spidey is Marvelous. Luckily the game isn't bad either, in fact, although this design is still a generation ahead of its time (pedestrians appear blocky and the skyline fades into flat shaded polys) this is yet another fine game, thanks to the added Venom levels and a comic book version of Spiderman I can finally get behind. Completing City Goals (races, rescues, arrests, and combat tours) open up Mission Goals where the meat resides: vintage Spidey with added Venom...lots of bark, lots of bite and more high-flying Marvel gaming goodness than any of us deserve. Love the bosses too; camera gets a bit tricky fighting them but you'll live. Dave Halverson





"...lots of bark, lots of bite and more high-flying Marvel gaming goodness..."

Donkey Kong Country 3

Game Boy Advance

9.0 Score

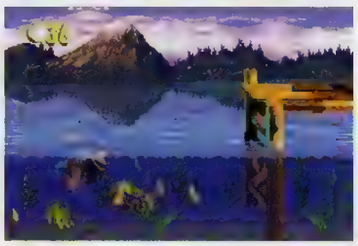
Developer: Rare **Publisher:** Nintendo **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** October

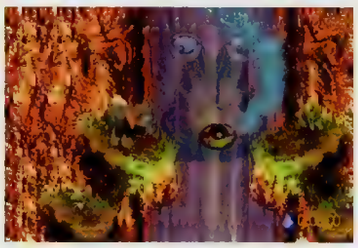
There's nothing I can tell you about DKC 3 that you don't already know but to refresh your memory this is the one starring Dixie and Kiddy Kong; Rare's third and in my opinion second best, after DKC 2 in a series that shocked and rocked a nation with photo real 16-bit 2D. Between Dixie's hover and prehensile hair and Kiddy's brawn 3 is jam packed with the usual pattern based mayhem on land, through caverns, and undersea, with an extra helping of switch pulling and ape-specific level devices. Since 2D never really evolved far beyond this point the game of course not only holds up but is a true blessing as it looks absolutely magnificent on the Micro screen. 2D may be gone but it will never be forgotten. If only Cranky had actually gotten his Cranky Kong Country; he'd have shown all us whippersnappers a thing or two, by golly.

Dave Halverson

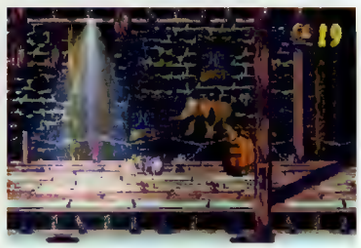










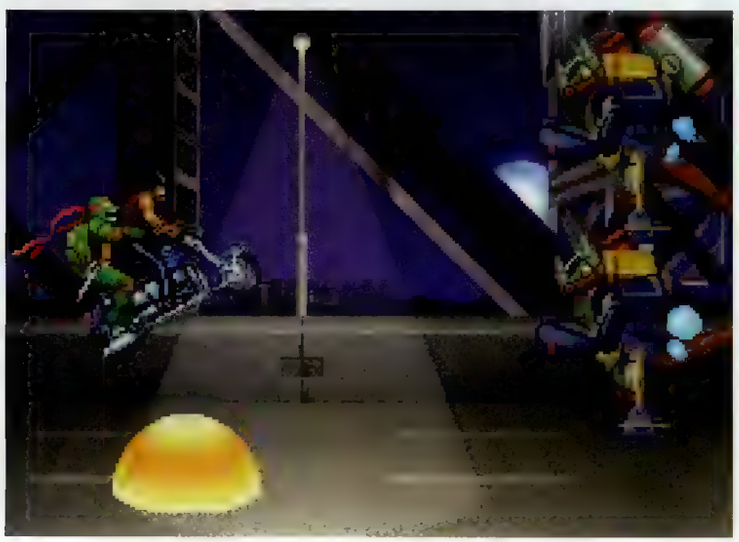


TMNT: Mutant Nightmare

Nintendo DS

Developer: Konami **Publisher:** Konami **Multiplayer:** 4-player co-op **Available:** October

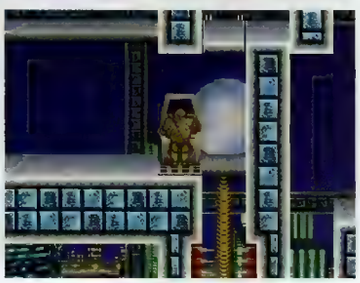
Unlike the latest console version, TMNT Mutant Nightmare is faring really well on the DS. By combining traditional Konami 2D action with touch screen implemented buddy play—a turtle for all reasons—we get the best of both worlds; more great 2D Turtles action along with some competent new DS features like opening and closing valves and tagging up to achieve various goals and attacks. At key moments in the game depending on who your core turtle is touching, the designated touch screen turtle will have the desired effect. All the while the series-endemic platforming and sewer crawling looks and plays as well as ever. It's not the same foe, as the Turtles have taken to time travel, battling the Triceratons (bi-pedal Triceratops with a taste for turtle soup) but I was getting tired of dispatching foot soldiers anyway. **DH**











When in the Course of Yes, of course I can fly! These wing[illegible] called together legislative bodies at places unusual, aren't for looks you know! The can accordingly Hammer[illegible] distant from the depository of their Public Laguz among Hammerne of the earth, the separate[illegible] into compliance station to Crimea Laws of Nature [illegible] Houses them, Daein respect here [illegible] on the should declare the [illegible] such these tru[illegible] to be [illegible] isla- t[illegible]y are [illegible] the [illegible] can [illegible] nd [illegible] on [illegible] is [illegible] and [illegible] has [illegible] ssent to [illegible] s Soren [illegible] ount threin [illegible] their salaries. [illegible] g's breath! Even [illegible] plete scum. He has [illegible] Armies without the [illegible] fected Bolganone the [illegible] the Civil Power. He has [illegible] to a king. Spells are simple, [illegible] r laws; giving his Assent. [illegible] whereas this is complex [illegible] than n[illegible]ne! Wow, your [illegible]: For putting off our [illegible] mposing Mordecai [illegible] lthunder of Trial by [illegible] be tried for pretended [illegible] tem of English Laws in a [illegible] rein an Arbitrary govern- [illegible] as to render it at Soren an [illegible] cing the same absolute rule [illegible] arters, abolishing our [illegible] ntally the beorc [illegible] atures, and declar- [illegible] for us in all Ike [illegible] injuries and [illegible] ent of an [illegible] Facts be [illegible] Laws, [illegible] has [illegible] sing [illegible] nt

FIRE EMBLEM
PATH OF RADIANCE



IN A LAND OF MAN AND BEAST, YOUR SMALL BAND OF MERCENARIES MUST NOW SAVE THE WORLD FROM A REAWAKENING EVIL FORCE. YOU'LL MAKE YOUR FIGHT ON THE 3D BATTLEFIELDS OF TELLIUS, WHERE STRATEGY IS ESSENTIAL AND DEATH IS FINAL. SO SHARPEN YOUR AXE. DRAW YOUR SWORD. IT'S TIME TO IGNITE THE FLAMES OF WAR.



TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Fantasy Violence

DOLBY PRO LOGIC II

NINTENDO GAMECUBE

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Burnout

PSP

8.5 Score

Developer: G-Artists **Publisher:** Bandai **Multiplayer:** 4p versus **Available:** September

Life in the slow lane is no life at all. With speed and gusto aplenty, the destruction-minded racer Burnout Legends takes its place in the sun, proving almost as potent as the three Burnout titles it liberally swipes its content from. Players are rewarded frequently and encouraged to plow onward with unlockable goodies, and Legends also supplies a wonderful complement of races and destructive challenges to be taken on or skipped at will. The caveats here are few as the developers did a nice job of capturing Burnout's breathless sense of velocity as well as its wicked series of car crashes and explosions on the PSP. Still, vehicles float and glide more than in the console Burnouts and while this problem is not crippling, it is exacerbated by the PSP's tiny screen and the game's resultant readjustment of its draw distances. Oncoming traffic and environmental obstacles are now harder to spot, let alone avoid, than they need be. **Greg Orolando**







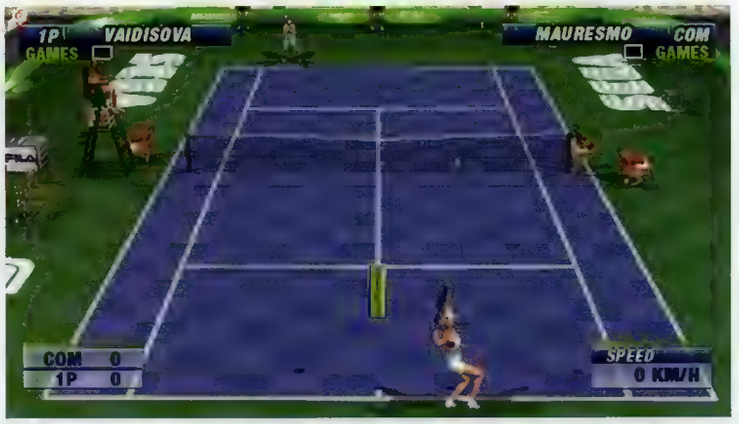
Virtua Tennis World Tour

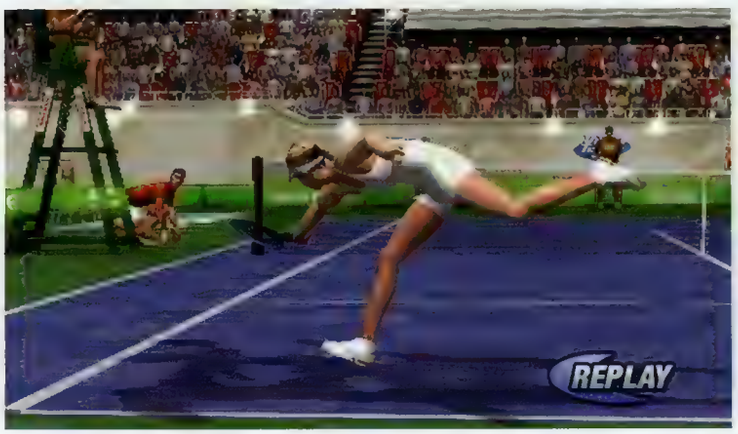
Nintendo DS

9.0 Score

Developer: Sega/Sumo Digital **Publisher:** Sega **Multiplayer:** 1-4p Wireless Support **Available:** September

What defines a great tennis game? Where superstar endorsements from both the men's and women's draw—and this game's got them—and multiple modes of play end, intuitive gameplay begins and is the true essence of any virtual tennis game. Just ask anyone who's ever played Tennis on NES. Sega's VT World Tour takes not only intuitive control but reactive animation to the next level and the ground level camera option provides some of the most realistic play yet. The way the players pre-empt and react to near misses and dives is astonishingly realistic. The only drawback here is that the characters don't so much look like themselves in terms of facial features. Sharapova's game for instance is certainly represented while her frame and visage are not, as it goes on down the line for pretty much both sides of the draw. **Dave Halverson**







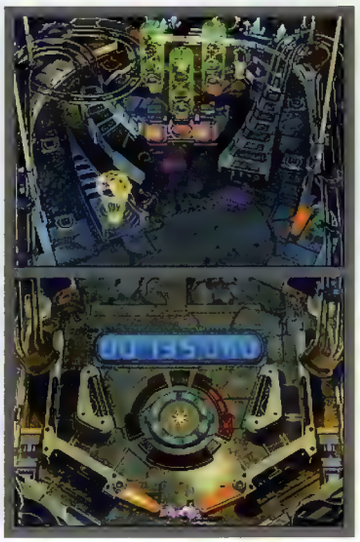
Metroid Prime Pinball

Nintendo DS — Score: 9.0

Developer: Nintendo **Publisher:** Nintendo **Multiplayer:** 8-player Wireless **Available:** October

Okay, the DS, officially, cannot get any cooler. Metroid Prime Pinball is positively trance-inducing. Enter sub levels off the Talon Overworld and Samus wall jumps with L&R; Metroid Mania has you blasting Metroids for double points, spell S-A-M-U-S and she pops out of the surface and it turns into a multi-directional shooter…trigger Phazon, clone and other multi-balls, or score enough points and jump levels off to Phendrana Drifts or Phazon Mines where four-paddle boss fights (and they shoot back, as do Space Pirates) await, where you can take aim at or acquire and launch missiles battling massive top-screen behemoths. If it's Metroid it's in here, and looking absolutely amazing (gotta love the rain in the Talon Overworld and shattering ice crystals in the Phendrana Drifts) set against Indigenous music from the series (the Pirate Frigate is host to the original Metroid theme remixed) that will have you playing with your balls like they're really a rolled-up blonde deep-space bounty hunter. **Dave Halverson**









Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time

Nintendo DS — Score: 8.5

Developer: Alphadream Corporation **Publisher:** Nintendo **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** October

I don't often get a good belly laugh from a video game, but then not many games pack the humorous charm of Mario and Luigi 2, a delightful adventure that has as much addictive gameplay going for it as that special Nintendo color. The game requires a very specific imagination, the kind that's reserved for the most dedicated of gamers, in tune to the characters' heritage and Japanese design eccentricities. Not everyone can find simple pleasure in Luigi babble-speak and Mario self-deprecation.

Familiar to anyone who played the original Mario and Lugi on GBA, this sequel mixes role-playing characteristics with an action incentive, playing off the classic platforming series' visual cues and mechanical staples, like jumping on ricocheting shells to dispose of the enemy in the turn-based battles. Baby Mario and Luigi now join the team, culled from the past from a time-travel stint—yeah, the story gets a wee bit drippy. With the four of them working in tandem, solving little puzzles and battling it out together, the game receives a nice little gameplay kick that stays simple but fun, even when it gets a bit protracted. Add in the nifty dual-screen presentation that expands the tangible dynamic of the world and you've got enough treasure to brighten the DS library. **Brady Fiechter**









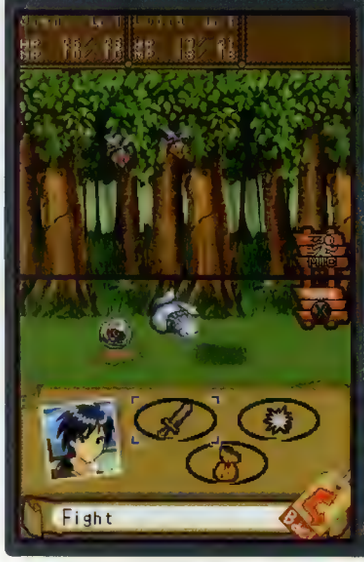


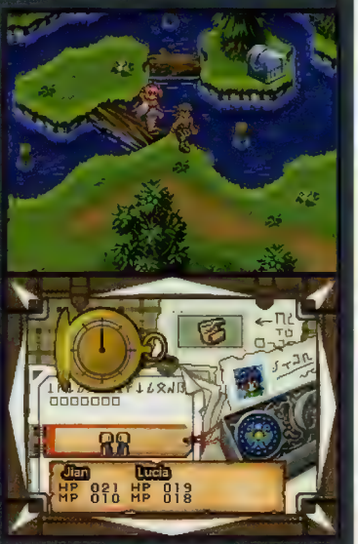
Lunar: Dragon Song

Nintendo DS — Score: 6.5

Developer: Game Arts / Japan Art Media **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** October

Lunar: Dragon Song marks the first full-length RPG to come to the DS, and it definitely has its pros and cons. The art is magnificent, it still has that cozy old-school feel to it, and the soundtrack has that same polish that the Lunars of old possess. However, there are a couple of peculiar choices the developers seem to have made…running depletes your health (and doesn't regenerate), and the battle





modes (Virtue and Combat) are disappointing. Virtue allows you to fight creatures for experience, while Combat gives no experience, but creatures drop items. These items fulfill courier jobs, and those jobs net you cash for equipment… but combing an area twice (once for experience, again for items) becomes tedious and aggravating. Why can't we have our EXP and loot stuff, too? **Ashley Esqueda**

Mega Man Battle Network 5: Double Team

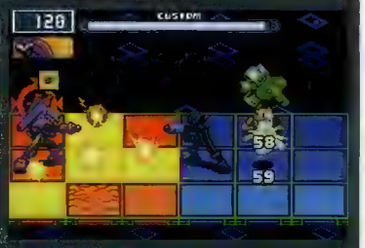
Nintendo DS — Score: 7.5

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom **Multiplayer:** 4p Wireless Support **Available:** September

Let's be honest here: Battle Network 4 left a lot lacking for MM fans around the globe. Fortunately, MMBN5 has been ported to the DS with some improvements that only make the game more of a treat than its GBA counterpart. The story isn't stale this time around (it even manages to drop in a few plot twists), and long-time veterans can import chips from previous incarnations of the series. New and old players alike are able to link up and









battle in a number of modes, including team, single, team tournament and singles tournament. Players will also have the ability to trade chips back and forth with other MM aficionados to beef up their navi-arsenal. Jack in and enjoy this one. **Ashley Esqueda**

Mario Tennis Power Tour

Game Boy Advance — Score: 8.5

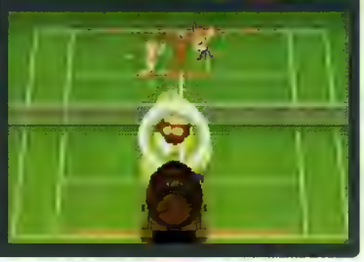
Developer: Camelot Software Planning **Publisher:** Nintendo **Multiplayer:** 4p versus **Available:** October

As they are inclined to do with their handheld Mario sports titles, Camelot Software Planning have crafted something of a mini-RPG to form the backbone of Mario Tennis Power Tour. Taking cues from Mario Golf Advance Tour and their own Golden Sun series, Camelot's latest eschews the straightforward action formula of its GameCube counterpart. While you can jump right in and play an exhibition match with your favorite Mario characters, the long-term play can be found in the story mode. Here, you rise through the ranks of the Royal Tennis Academy by winning matches and leveling up, earning new abilites along the way. Of course, the tennis action itself is of great importance to the appeal of the game, and here the game is surprisingly close to its bigger brother, with the same addictive charge shots and simple, satisfying play. **Michael Hobbs**









Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06

PSP — Score: 8.0

Developer: EA Sports **Publisher:** EA Sports **Multiplayer:** Head-to-head Wireless **Available:** August

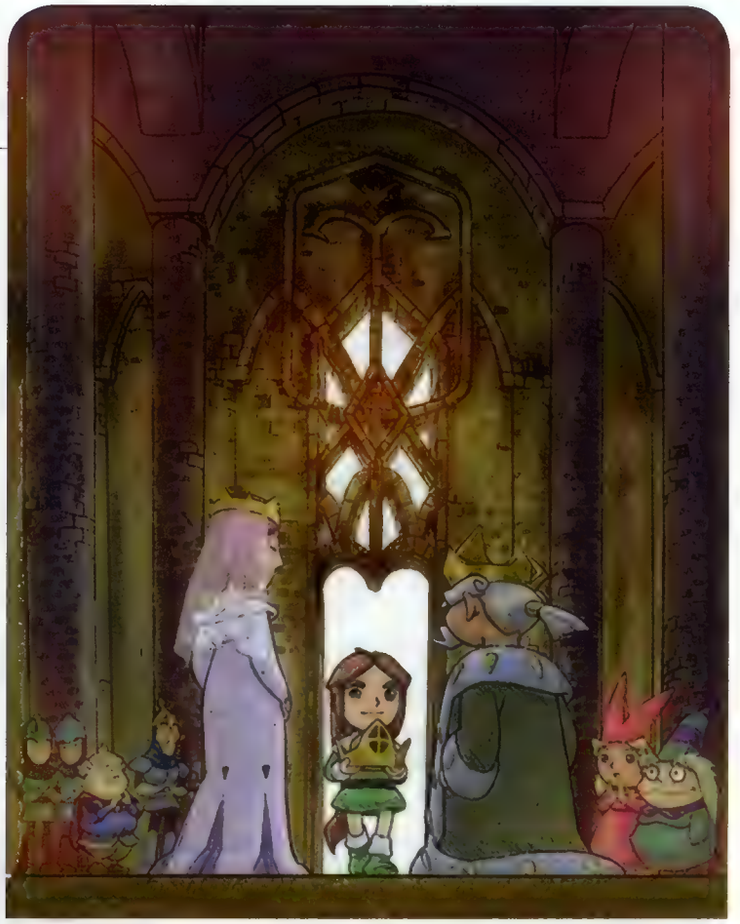
While I didn't play the last Tiger Woods that much, I didn't want to, because the load times were difficult to tolerate, and the overall presentation felt too stripped down. Was it just a rush job? Not this round. This latest offering on PSP is a much improved, almost-mirror image of the console versions in most the places that count. The swinging mechanism isn't quite what you might want if you're all about the bigger versions—time for that dual-analog peripheral—but there's no need to nitpick when everything plays so well as a handheld. You've got plenty of courses, options and modes to keep you hooked. **Brady Fiechter**





PoPoLoCrois

The PSP finally gets a magnificent RPG



Oh PoPoLoCrois, where do I begin? For those of you who aren't familiar with this franchise…get familiar. This RPG is brilliant, taking me back to the good old days when games like FFVII and Vagrant Story were king. They don't make RPGs like this anymore. In case you're wondering what PoPoLoCrois is, it's a kingdom where 10-year-old Prince Pietro has been raised by his father, since his mother died shortly after he was born. One night, he discovers that she isn't dead at all, just in a trance. A spell must be found to awaken her…a spell only available in the land of Bryonia, a floating island that only comes but once a year and brings monsters and discord to all the lands. Pietro decides he must awaken his mother by bringing back the book from the library in Bryonia, and sets off to make things right again.

The story has that perfect balance of humor, drama, and quirk that so few RPGs today achieve, and it's only magnified by the excellent battle system. Battles in PoPoLoCrois are fought with unique blends of grid-based (yet traditional) attacks, summon gems, and specials. When you get into battle, your characters move on a grid not unlike a strategy RPG…however, one player takes up four squares, so you can hit multiple enemies if you line up correctly. If you can't (or don't wish) to put a character in danger, you can skip a turn to power up that person… and combine forces with an ally that's also skipped their turn to pull off powerful combos. Leveling up never feels like a chore since you're constantly on the move from one area to the next, and the story is fluid but still entertaining and exciting.

> "The story has that perfect balance of humor, drama, and quirk that so few RPGs today achieve..."



When you play PoPoLoCrois, you feel like you've arrived home. Even the music has a special *je ne se quois* to it… When you defeat something in battle, the chime that rings makes you smile in a way that you haven't in a long time. PoPoLoCrois has the right combination of whimsy, excitement, exploration, and it's just plain *fun*. If you've been waiting for an RPG for the PSP, this is it. **Ashley Esqueda**

PoPoLoCrois — 9.0 Score

PSP

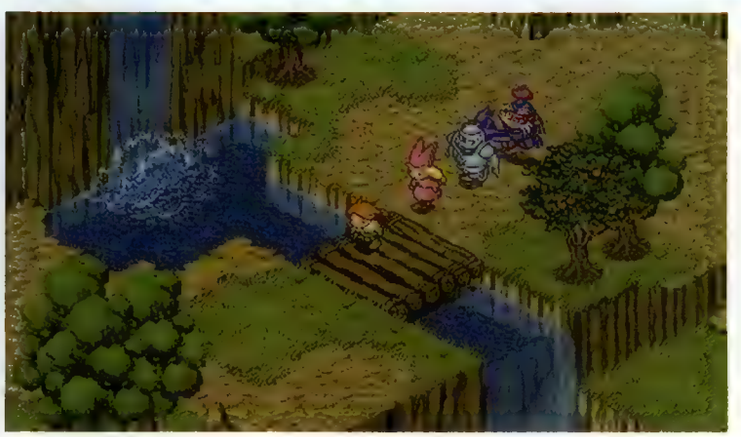
+ The PSP's first RPG is elegant, fun, and bursting with old-school RPG charm

− Traversing the land can feel like a chore when you're running between towns attempting to finish a quest.

Developer: SCEI **Publisher:** Agetec Inc.
Multiplayer: None **Available:** October

Little Prince Pietro dashes through another beautiful backdrop.



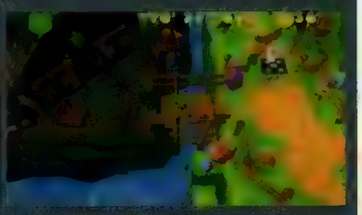


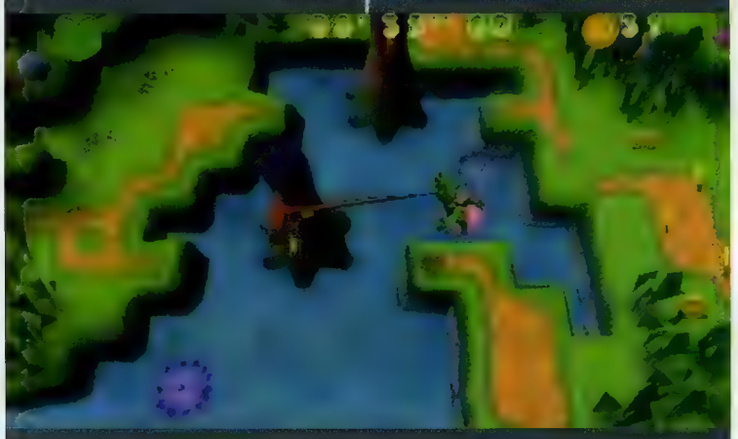
Frogger Helmet Chaos

PSP — Score: 6.5

Developer: Konami **Publisher:** KCE Hawaii **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** September

Evil reptiles have created a helmet that hypnotizes its wearer, and it's up to our green hero Frogger to save the day. Helmet Chaos doesn't stray far from the original game's formula... it's still grid-based, although the graphics have been updated quite a bit from its first incarnation to the PSP's widescreen. The game is vibrant, mildly entertaining, and offers an array of puzzles to solve while you navigate Frogger through each level. Bouncing kittens (that are being tossed out of a burning building, no less) off of a lilypad was actually fun, entertaining, and hilarious. Although I'm a little peeved by the fact that Frogger still can't swim, Helmet Chaos is a fun little romp that does the franchise right. **Ashley Esqueda**a





Generation of Chaos

PSP

Developer: Idea Factory **Publisher:** Nippon Ichi Software **Multiplayer:** TBD **Available:** Q2 2006

Relentlessly bringing us one SRPG after another, NIS is at it again, teaming up with Idea Factory to bring a signature SRPG to your PSP library. Generation of Chaos boasts a robust and deep strategy experience, as you begin with a small, weak kingdom and branch out, conquering other kingdoms and expanding your armies. It's looking gorgeous with incredible character art, and a the battle system hasn't been watered down for the handheld market; in fact, GoC ups the SRPG ante, showing off 30 vs. 30 battles and pushing the PSP's limits in ways that will make SRPG fans giddy. This is a war that could prove incredibly fun and satisfying... Ready the troops! **Ashley Esqueda**





Snowboard Kids SBK

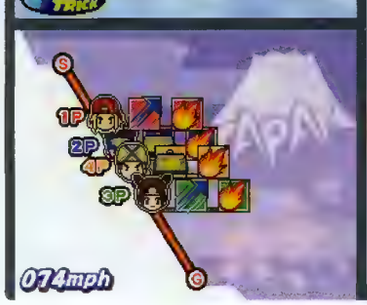
Nintendo DS

Developer: Atlus Co. **Publisher:** Atlus Co. **Multiplayer:** TBA **Available:** Q2 2006

Boarding fans might look at SBK and brush it off as a kid's game, but it's worth a second look. SBK is fresh and making use of the DS in a fun way. Using the touch screen as a sort of mini-game within a mini-game, you'll be required to touch certain spots on the DS screen to pull off huge air and killer combos. Racing other players has an almost Mario Kart-like feel to it, as you'll sail through boxes, each offering some sort of powerup (or weapon). Offering board customization and different characters to choose from (each with their own pros and cons), SBK looks to be a title with high replay value and even higher fun factor. **Ashley Esqueda**









Formula Front: Armored Core Special Edition

PSP — Score: 7.0

Developer: From Software **Publisher:** Agetec Inc. **Multiplayer:** 1-2 **Available:** October

With apologies to Quiet Riot, this metal health may well drive you mad. Armored Core as done on the PSP remains as menu heavy and customization option-laden as its console forebears, but this makes for an awkward handheld experience. Edition's density is unrepentant and the demands on a player's time are severe; mech-based warfare takes a back seat to behind-the-scenes strategy and item manipulation to such an extent that the game is not conducive to on-the-go play sessions. Even the manual control for the robots in combat emerges as moderately jerky and ungainly enough exercise to suggest it was someone's idea of an afterthought. Rock-em and sock-em, these robots do, but Agetec takes far too long to get them in the ring. **Greg Orlando**





Review

Black & White 2

A spectacle of godly light and sound

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows XP	Video: GeForce 6/Radeon X800
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: Dx9 compatible
Memory: 1 GB RAM	Internet: N/A

Lionhead is on a roll, and Black & White 2 will not diminish that hot streak. The game's technology and production values are better than ever and B&W 2 reaps the benefits, raising the experience of this sequel to epic proportions. There's also more flexibility to rule as you wish.

Black & White 2's greatest asset is its freedom of alignment. As the leader of your civilization and creature avatar, you can essentially bounce between godly moods as you see fit. It pays off to build massive and ornate towns to win over the approval of nearby towns, thus drawing their people to your paradise, but this is not a path you need to adhere to. You can create a bustling metropolis only to become a warmonger using all of the eagerly recruited peons to fatten your army. Should you continue down this path of war, your force will swell into an incredible mass. These skirmishes look amazing, and much like B&W 2's global control scheme, it's a breeze to move your troops around. You can temper this terror by welcoming the infidels to live in your town, where you might tax them with torture. You can develop into a deity so festering evil that your on-screen god hand becomes scaled and tattooed, and the surface of the planet in and around your area of worship becomes tainted, charred and demonic.

When B&W 2 is peaking, with miracles and magic, huge clashes and world shifting effects, there's really no show quite like it in all of gaming. It looks absolutely thrilling in its best moments. The chatter of your townsfolk and warriors, and the inner thoughts—a great touch—of opposing leaders, match the near perfect vocal delivery of the emissaries that guide you. This is a truly vast and enchanting hybrid RTS only slightly marred by minor camera pains (altitude can do funny things) and perhaps a few under realized god powers. **Mike Griffin**







Help your loyal followers...or eat them.

Black & White 2 — 8.5 Score

PC

Top-notch visuals and sound. Excellent control scheme will keep you playing, not struggling to manage the world.

Some quirky camera movement. More basic godly effects in standard world building sections would have been nice.

Developer: Lionhead Studios **Publisher:** EA Games
Online: None **Available:** October

> "You can develop into a deity so festering evil that your on-screen god hand becomes scaled and tattooed..."

Review

Bet On Soldier: Blood Sport

The stakes are too high

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows XP	Video: GeForce 6/Radeon X800
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: Dx9 compatible
Memory: 1 GB RAM	Internet: Broadband

Kylotonn's Bet On Solider isn't firing on all cylinders, but it comes close. The game's basic premise involves an alternate 1998 where the world is devastated by corporate-sponsored war. Real war is now a televised event, and hotshot soldiers have become superstar athletes in a deathmatch broadcast. The campaign has you blasting through the frontlines as a rising star in the Bet on Soldier show.

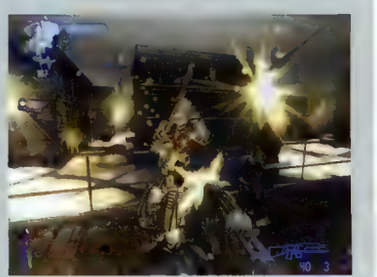
Bet on Soldier plays like a contemporary action FPS, but at key points you'll face off against another BOS contender for cash prizes. Fences drop down to seal off nearby exits, the TV show announces your opponent in an irritatingly non-skippable cut-scene and a countdown begins the 1-on-1 Bet round. These deathmatch duels can occur right in the midst of warfare (not simply end level boss fights), and a win will fatten your credit account immediately. You can then use that cash to refill weapons and armor at repair stations dotted throughout the level. Using a very similar mechanism, you can also bet on human opponents in the multiplayer mode. If each player agrees to face-off, they can meet at an area where the actual multiplayer level becomes a dueling ground.

There's a story in there too, and a pretty good attempt to give the game an epic feel, but the overall design and polish can't keep up. Despite layers of shiny bump and normal-mapped armor and weaponry, the troops fundamentally do not animate very well. It's cool that your squad mates spot and announce enemies by class and type, but most of the VO is pretty lackluster. To save your game mid-level you must purchase save points at static terminals. No cash = no mid-level save. Several other minor miscues must be endured, and it's basically a checklist of stuff that a much larger QA department may have stamped out.

The aforementioned is unfortunate, because when Bet On Soldier's action really heats up later in the campaign, the level design and intensity improve dramatically. And the multiplayer depth, with all the betting and class upgrades and repair terminals...much potential. It's a recommended shooter, but do expect some wobbly elements. **Mike Griffin**







Bet On Soldier: Blood Sport — 7.0 Score

PC

Many solid action sequences deeper in the game. The betting system has loads of untapped potential.

Good presentation is sabotaged by dubious animations and amateur voice over. Mid-level save system is too arbitrary.

Developer: Kylotonn Entertainment **Publisher:** Digital Jesters
Online: 32-player multiplayer **Available:** September

> "Real war is now a televised event."





Review

Quake 4

The confident continuance of a classic

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows 2k/XP	Video: GeForce 6/Radeon X800
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: Audigy 2+
Memory: 1 GB RAM	Internet: Broadband

Let's dispatch Quake 4's campaign length, front and center: we put in just shy of twelve hours before the end credits rolled. This may or may not be important to you, based on how you intend to measure your mileage with Quake 4. What Raven and id have provided in this sequel's campaign is a big, loud and powerful sci-fi action FPS experience; a dozen or so hours of triple-A presentation locked into a stretch of easily consumed narrative that finally explores the central players and themes of the franchise, cementing an identity to build upon in future titles. And despite a few underwhelming sidetracks, it's a great run. Gauge the full potential of Quake 4 by also incorporating its assertively simple and supremely addictive multiplayer modes, and the game's full worth begins to crystallize.

Quake 4 looks great, in fact, it's drop-dead gorgeous at times. The high standard sort of comes with the territory—especially in futuristic indoor sets—when you have the Doom 3 engine conducting things. Raven's artists use deep colors, fog and lighting to work that incomparable bump-mapped shadow play to great effect. You may even find yourself lingering in certain key interior locales simply to absorb the layers of gleaming technology and gore. It's an interesting nod to gaming's artistic diversity that we can look at a game like Okami, let's say, and melt into its beautiful traditional cell texturing, while a title like Quake 4, this brute of menacingly atmospheric biomechanical environments, can elicit a similar appreciative thrill. On the other hand, there are some weaker areas. Big explosion effects (for stuff like crashing air ships) look pretty canned, and where Quake 4's indoors and characters impress with staggering detail, the outdoor levels can be somewhat wearying in terms of geometry and palette choices, while the skybox art encasing the horizon is inexplicably low-res at times. Also, the undulating intestine effect (a familiar sight for Doom 3 players) really doesn't look so hot when the textures are being stretched at weird angles. Such contrasts are easy to come by when drawn alongside the best visuals that Quake 4 offers, and the fact is: even if you crammed a close approximation of Quake 4's level design into the *Doom 2* engine...it'd still be worth playing.

Yes, Quake 4 delivers some incredible action to tie everything together, but the campaign gameplay is guilty of being slightly formulaic at times. It rehashes many objective-based devices from previous FPS titles and, as mentioned, allots far too much screen time to mission sidetracks that frankly do very little to heighten tension or support the game's pacing. You know the drill: activate the generator, locate the database, flip the door lock, etc. Within the game's pleasantly nuanced military theme, these are perfectly suitable sub-tasks, fortified by instances of character and plot development such as Earth marines conversing—a timbre of fear and respect in their voices—about the Strogg's imposing technology. Placed inside the flow of Quake 4's action, however, these side-missions sometimes introduce a sense of fragmentation; you can feel them pulling awkwardly at the game's momentum. If Quake 4 had a more open-ended campaign this wouldn't be an issue; then again, it also wouldn't be the same focused action experience when it counts most.

Quake 4 ploughs ahead with great vigor and righteous firepower through its big action set pieces. Strategy is built on straightforward twitch fire and cover: outmaneuver the Strogg infantry's basic team tactics while dodging and shooting (plenty of missiles to blow out of the sky) the

Quake 4 utilizes the Doom 3 engine in spectacular fashion.





"Raven's artists use deep colors, fog and lighting to work that incomparable bump-mapped shadow play to great effect."

projectiles of larger and more exotic foes. There are mounted-gun levels on rails with somewhat predictable, but nonetheless well-orchestrated breaks and triggers, and the mech walker sequences—the strongest outdoor level design in the game—feature some thrilling long-range battles. The medic and repair squad mates that occasionally tag along through missions are thankfully equipped with enough AI to know their role and stay out of the way. They also animate rather well, much like all of Quake 4's humanoid characters, so they look convincing and alive...until an elite cyborg skewers them at the end of a massive hand blade. Weapons feel precise and balanced: fundamentals like the reload, cool down, impact and splash radius of each piece provides satisfying results. There's a certain minimalism to these weapon designs—even the alien Strogg ordnance—that's very specific to the Quake universe, and Raven has nailed it. And a well-deserved kudos to the progressive enhancements added to weaponry over the course of the game: you don't feel like you're starting with a lame stripped-down model...your guns just get *a lot* better as the game proceeds.

We reviewed Quake 4 well before any multiplayer demo or public servers went live, but that didn't stop the folks at Activision from throwing their best QA guys into the ring with us for a full day of fragging. First and foremost, just like Fata1ity mentioned last month, the multiplayer gameplay feels a lot like Quake 3—and that's a good thing. You have the chunkier hitboxes on characters, proper strafe jumping, and the rail and lightning guns bring a familiar speed and timing. The rocket launcher may be a smidgeon slower, but Quake 4 isn't really trying to *be* Q3, so little changes should be expected. Level design for the core deathmatch maps is excellent: fast paths and angles with intelligent platform and weapon locations. The CTF environments seem to pull some architectural influence from recent Unreal titles and choke points are deliberately spaced to keep a reasonable flow between Strogg and Marine territories. It's hard to say whether Quake 4 will enjoy the same level of competitive success as franchise predecessors (the genre is *very* busy this season), but id and Raven have obviously tried to keep things simple, familiar and addictive for fans.

Ultimately Quake 4 falls a little short of living up to its considerable hype, but that certainly doesn't preclude it from being a game you should own, whether right now on your PC (see system specs, top) or in about a month on your Xbox 360. It's an impressive first person shooter to behold, the engine proving to be a near-perfect match for Raven's designs. And despite a few ill-conceived lulls in the flow of gameplay, the campaign is entertaining to be a part of—aided by some arresting ambience and the quality VO of actors Charles Napier and Peter Stormare. Then there's the pedigree of Quake 4's multiplayer...a sugarcoating we'll inevitably be making use of. **Mike Griffin**

Quake 4

Score

Amazing presentation for the most part. Plenty of "Holy Shit" moments that will stay with you. Solid multiplayer.

Too short, and a few too many cliché objectives that break up the rhythm. Minor visual discrepancies stand out.

Developer: Raven Software **Publisher:** Activision
Online: Capture the Flag, Deathmatch, Team DM **Avail:** Oct/Nov

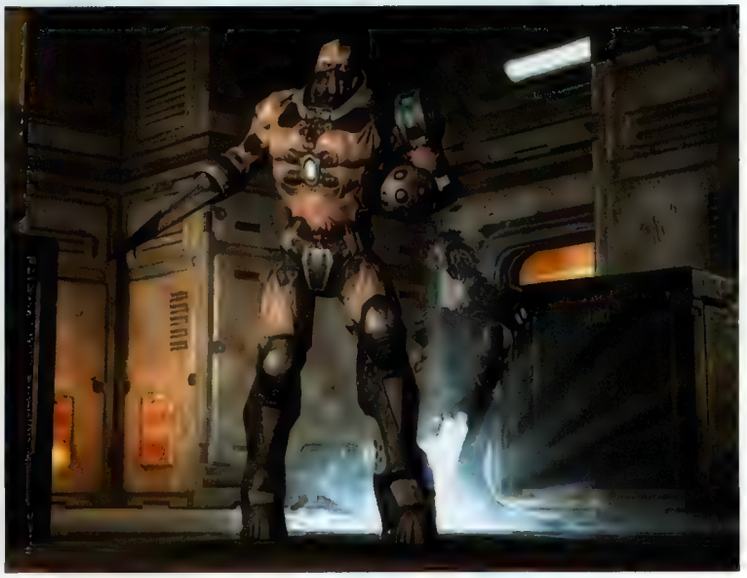






An onslaught of biomechanical mutations, ready to rip you to pieces.





Preview

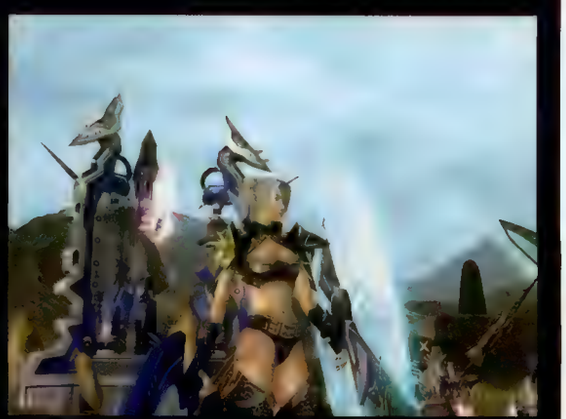
RF Online

The lateset online phenom heads west

Codemasters left an entire community of dedicated and salivating fans hanging last year when it cancelled Dragon Empires, the oft-delayed and much-maligned MMO project they had been preparing for years. On the brink of that cancellation, the company had already been ramping up preparations for a full server and subscription service, so it wasn't exactly shocking news when Codemasters recently announced a western publishing deal for the massively multiplayer title RF Online. Developed by CCR, RF (Rising Force) Online is currently giving Lineage 2 a run for its money in Korea, and Sega has picked it up for release across Japan this fall. Needless to say, it's a hot property.

"RF Online approaches the genre with familiar ideas that involve greater repercussions."











Conflict and desire

RF Online approaches the genre with familiar ideas that involve greater repercussions. Three very distinct factions have been realized, bound by a defining theme: control of resources. This mantra has been linked to every facet of gameplay. The Accretian Empire is a mechanized race comprised of soldiers and conquerors, whose primary mandate is to expand the totalitarian regime, acquire material and destroy all lesser civilizations in the path of expansion. The Cora Holy Alliance is an erudite race, frail of body but profoundly gifted in the magical arts. Founded upon centuries of internal strife and many religious divisions, the Cora people have united as one under their god, Disem, to defend against foreign attacks. The Bellato Union is a gnomish race with ranks of slippery-tongued traders and gifted mechanics. Their amazing robot battle units (controllable by players) tend to drive their offense, but a hint of magic also pervades this society. Driving the conflict between these three vastly different factions is the planet Novus, a spectacular world rich in metal, mineral and arcane treasures that each race desperately covets. The Accretians simply want to pillage and control the planet, while the Bellato Union see Novus as a merchant hotbed that must be acquired as a trading hub. The Cora faction simply want to preserve the arcane ruins of the world, deepen their religious ties to the land and receive the blessings of their deity. At the center of Novus is a gigantic mine that doubles as the game's realm-versus-realm battleground. Controlling the Crag Mine is the key to maintaining an advantage in the war for Novus.

Worth fighting for

Champions of the mines will naturally have their names immortalized on the Rising Force leader boards, and the top ranking players from each side could be given the opportunity to lead their faction into large-scale realm battles that occur every eight hours. A champion might even broker a temporary alliance with another faction when one side is becoming dangerously powerful. Winning in the mines has several important ancillary side effects as well. The material prize is a special ore that can be refined to make money or equipment. Without this ore, certain tiers of weapons and armor can't be crafted, so it's crucial to keep winning and keep the supply line flowing so your faction stays well equipped. RF Online will not have degradation in weapon or armor quality due to general use or death, so every freshly forged piece of ore-derived equipment is good for the long haul. Also of critical importance are the Talics: these are ore-based gems that act as weapon and armor enhancements—a familiar concept for any RPG player. Slot one in to an item to add extra attack, defense and magic stats. Interestingly, players not attracted to extreme combat can also help to make progress for the good of their race as expert Crafters. Exotic Talics will prove to be a significant source of crafting advancement and a welcome boon on the battlefield.

Rising to the occasion

RF Online's character advancement takes the "job" approach so common to Asian MMOs, where multi-classing is very popular. And while it's always best to strengthen core abilities, RF will let players pile a ton of development into specific areas through a mastery gauge that covers virtually every class of weapon and magic. The more you use any one power, be it an Accretian ranger's wicked mounted rocket or the healing wind of a Cora healer, the more experience and skill points you will earn in that particular discipline. The Bellato Union make good use of mountable robot units, and as we've witnessed in the Japanese beta, a fully mastered high level Bellato mech is a force to be reckoned with. Each race has similar high level perks, such as the Cora's powerful spiritual minions that can be summoned forth to heal and fight. The faction PvP certainly has an important place in RF Online's grand scheme, but there's also a full RPG experience in each realm where players can run through quests and beef up their characters the old fashioned way: by slaughtering monsters that drop loot. Maybe even phat lewt.

Early hands-on play confirms that RF Online is a very approachable MMO. Camera use, control and targeting are quickly intuitive, and the interface emphasizes hotkeys, shortcuts and auto-equipping with minimal clicks and drags. The engine is just slightly dated, though it will allow maximum scalability so mid-range PC users can take part in the Crag Mines without having their frame rate choke. Any lacking complexity is easily compensated for by superb artistic direction in the form and color of each realm. The game also has a very good symphonic soundtrack. It would appear that Codemasters has made a well-informed decision by acquiring RF Online. What comes next—how CM handles the localization, community building, and western-influenced gameplay tweaks—will decide RF Online's fate. **Mike Griffin**

RF Online

PC

Point of Interest

Die-hard PvPers can use a tactical bird's eye camera mode to assess the playing field from high above.

Developer: CCR **Publisher:** Codemasters
Online: Massively Multiplayer **Available:** Q1 2006



Deep character development and stellar visuals…if Codemasters can ensure balanced PvE and PvP gameplay, we may have a winner.

Postscript

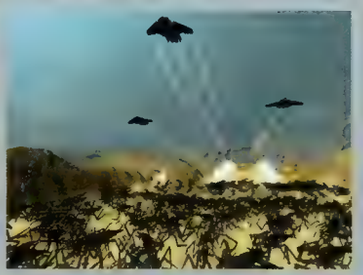
Froghop: connecting your addiction

Ever wonder what it would be like to open your MMO character inventory...on your cell phone? Or how about pinging your guild leader through in-game chat to discuss how the raid is going...from the back of a taxi? Maybe some quick item crafting or housekeeping through your mobile handset during a lunch break, dialed right into the server of your chosen online RPG? A company called Froghop is now exploring such possibilities and several MMO publishing suitors are vying to use the new technology platform.

The buzzword here is "Trans Medial Access", or TMA, and Froghop is exploring ways to use their platform to allow mobile users to interact with their favorite persistent worlds, such as thematic mini-games played through mobile devices that yield experience point rewards inside the full MMO. We'll know more about Froghop's long term plans soon, including partnerships and service.

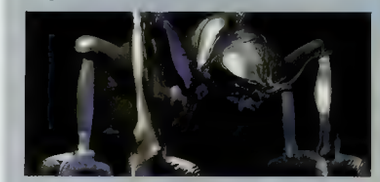
Starship Troopers: still squashing bugs

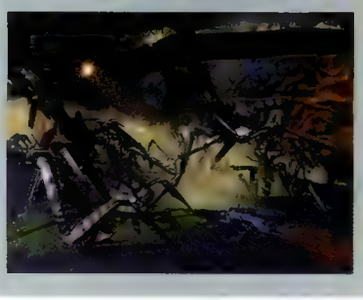




One of Empire Interactive's biggest fall titles is surfacing after a slight delay. Starship Troopers, developed by Strangelite, will take players back to the planet Hesperus where a battered human colony is struggling against hordes of alien bugs. Events in this sophisticated shooter begin about five years after the second film, and the war is not going well.

You dive right into the thick of it as a marine, surrounded by the sets and colors of the first two films across infiltration and large-scale operations. Classic scenes from the first film where hundreds of bugs clatter across the battlefield are being rendered convincingly through Strangelite's SWARM engine. They claim the engine is capable of all the Dx9 effects of Doom 3 and Half-Life 2 in addition to being specially designed for extremely model-intensive scenes. Regarding the game's music: word from composer Richard Jacques is that we should expect energetic combat tunes, and there could be some rousing military rolls reminiscent of the great original film score by Basil Poledouris. The genre is stuffed this fall, but who can resist giant exploding bugs?





NPD PC Game Sales

[redacted]

01. The Sims 2: Nightlife (Expansion Pack) - EA
02. EverQuest: Depths Of Darkhollow (Expansion Pack) - Sony Online Ent.
03. World Of Warcraft - Vivendi Universal
04. Battlefield 2 - EA
05. EverQuest II: Dessert Of Flames (Expansion Pack) - Sony Online Ent.
06. Guild Wars - NCsoft
07. Dungeon Siege 2 - Microsoft
08. The Sims 2 - EA
09. Aquazone Desktop Garden 1.0 - Allume Systems
10. The Sims Deluxe - EA

Granado Espada making waves in Far East



The massively multiplayer boom continues to spread like wildfire across Asia, and Hitachi, one of Japan's largest electronics companies, is entering the fray as Hanbit Ubiquitous Entertainment—a joint venture with Korean MMO giant Hanbit. Their first big release will be Granado Espada, developed by Korea's IMC, and it features character designs by Tomomi Kobayashi of SaGa (Square) series fame as well as hotshot Korean artist Limha Lekan, who recently worked with Phantagram and Game Arts.

Granado Espada presents an interpretation of 17th century colonization and follows the people and factions that have arrived in the New World. There's also magic and darkness afoot, of course. GE will introduce some interesting new ideas to the genre, including the MCC (Multi Character Control) system. Basically, every player gets to control three characters simultaneously in GE, something that's never been done before in an MMO. Unlike the simple pet control of other online RPGs, in Granado Espada you fully develop and control all three characters, swapping between them as you wish. Your two AI party members will immediately support you based on their current stance (offensive or defensive), and also according to the character class you're using. The AI plays off the combination of the three classes. This neatly solves two issues: First off, it deters players from creating automated bot programs because all three characters must be controlled to succeed in combat. Granado Espada also considers the idea of selling game items and currency for real-life money, and how that can be mitigated. Where players have focused on item and equipment collections in the past, GE will have a mercenary market-style system designed for the trading of complete characters. Characters you've created on your own will even keep the names you first give them, although they will adopt their new owners' family name if traded.





Several more genuinely intriguing innovations are being planned for Granado Espada. Stuff like a Replay function, to perhaps record and review your strategies against bosses or in team-versus-team skirmishes. The Japanese beta will be activating several hundred extra testers then scaling up with thousands more before the late '05 or early '06 launch of the game—now being heralded as a major MMO launch.

BATTLEFIELD GEAR



Artillery



OCZ Gold Memory



Battle Tank



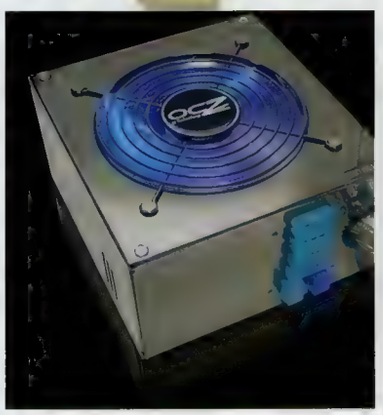
Grenades



Squad Automatic Weapons



Apache Helicopter



OCZ Modstream





Listen up soldier, we're at war! Are you armed and ready to enter the battlefield? Are you willing to risk another man's life because you came to combat with inferior fragging equipment? If you want to down the opposing force's vehicles and frag your enemy into shameful oblivion then I suggest you listen up! Here in the battlefield you need more than just an elite squad and an apache helicopter for terrain supremacy....you need the confidence and power that comes with an OCZ ModStream Power Supply, capable of infinite cable configurations and over 520W of system nourishing power. Don't forget to tune your weapons! Make every shot count with the ultra fast GX 3500 (Gamer eXtreme) Gold Edition memory, or decimate the competition with a DDR2 Gold 2GB or 4GB dual channel kit. Gear up soldier, and enter the battle equipped with the most potent weaponry....arm yourself with OCZ!

Gear up at: newegg.com outpost.com microcenter.com monarchcomputer.com tigerdirect.com onsale.com directron.com pcclub.com atacom.com



We got a little hasty with our grand ambitions for Play Japan last month, perhaps not realizing the immense amount of space the Tokyo Game Show 2005 would require to cover. To that end, we've devoted the entire section to the event. We did get one prediction right, however: Lots o' developer interviews. In addition to some admittedly hastily-assembled TGS reportage, we've got seven interviews with some of the Japanese game industry's greatest luminaries to chew on. Next month should see us return to our regularly-scheduled programming.

< **Nick Des Barres** **Dai Kohama** >



Show Report

words Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama



f E3 was the revolution, TGS 2005 was its evolution. Call it E3.5 if you will. While nothing can quite top the simultaneous announcement of all three next-generation systems at once, TGS 2005 put up a valiant fight, with its debut of playable Xbox360, first look at proven-realtime PS3, and shock Nintendo announcement. It might not be able to compete this year in the sheer wow department, but Tokyo Game Show is simply more fun than E3...and not nearly as stressful. E3 is glitz, glam, and gauche. The feeling you get walking across the show floor is just this side of physical pain. TGS, while still quite a spectacle, is as serene as a Zen rock garden in comparison. No unnerving, constant techno thumping, no walking miles between halls, no crazy-eyed PR people haranguing you to death with big, glistening Lee Press-On Smiles, no bleached blondes with capped teeth shoving their artificial breasts in your face (instead, the breasts are tastefully natural). Plus there's the opportunity to experience the show with your fellow gamer: TGS has but one business-only day, with the following two being every man for himself, industry folk and general users alike rubbing shoulders. Numerically this disparity should not make sense -- E3 2005 had 70,000 attendees, TGS 176,000 -- but strangely enough, it does. The crowd density may be higher, and you may have to wait over two hours to play your favorite game on the public days, but something about TGS feels downright intimate.

Into this rarefied atmosphere is thrust the next generation of gaming, along with the glorious closing chapter of the previous. Shows in-between generations are always the most memorable (the 1995 and 2000 E3s and TGSes spring readily to mind), and TGS 2005 will probably prove to be no exception. The best of the old, and the first of the new -- hidden somewhere amidst the sound and the fury lies that elusive nugget of our collective gaming future, if we but possess the skills, foresight and knowledge to parse it. Trade shows are a singularly unique sensory experience; when one sits down to commune with a game, one is usually alone with it, not being assaulted from all angles by hundreds of other tempting options. We've done our best to process, digest, organize and interpret the images, the information, the sounds and the smells of Tokyo Game Show 2005. We hope you enjoy them.

Top 5 surprises

1 Revolution Controller

Will it alienate hardcore gamers? Drive Nintendo further into their niche? Make Mom want to play video games? Usher in the next generation of interactive entertainment? Only time will tell. But was it a surprise? Oh yes. Oh yes indeed.

2 Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

Señor Snake. Metal Gear MkII from Snatcher. Best *confirmed-realtime* visuals ever seen in a video game. Kojima back at the helm. 'Nuff said.









COSPLAY MADNESS
Unlike American Cosplayers, Japan knows how it's done.

Top 10 playable demos

1. Okami PS2 Capcom/Clover Studio
2. Soul Calibur III PS2 Bandai-Namco
3. Rogue Galaxy PS2 Sony/Level 5
4. Phantasy Star Universe PS2/PC Sega/Sonic Team
5. Kingdom Hearts II PS2 Square-Enix
6. Suikoden V PS2 Konami
7. Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII PS2 Square-Enix
8. Extreme Ghouls 'n' Ghosts PSP Capcom
9. Ryu Ga Gotoku PS2 Sega
10. Dead Rising Xbox360 Capcom



Top 10 unplayable demos

1. Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots PS3 Konami/Kojima Productions
2. Sonic the Hedgehog PS3/Xbox360 Sega/Sonic Team
3. Resident Evil 5 PS3/Xbox360 Capcom
4. Dead Or Alive 4 -- Xbox360 -- Tecmo/Team Ninja
5. Final Fantasy XII -- PS2 -- Square-Enix
6. Vision Gran Turismo PS3 Sony/Polyphony Digital
7. Mobile Suit Gundam PS3 Bandai-Namco
8. Tengai Makyo ZIRIA: Harukanaru Zipang E Xbox360 Hudson
9. Final Fantasy XI: Online: Treasures of Aht Uhrgan PS2/PC/Xbox360 Square-Enix
10. Landstalker PSP Climax









REVOLUTION CONTROLLER

3 Microsoft's solid plan for Japan

Ol' Bill definitely seems to have learned for his mistakes. What do those crazy Japanese like? Sakaguchi-produced orthodox RPG(s)? Check. Dynasty Warriors clone? Check. Family board game? Check. A slimmer system profile? Um, sorta check. Still, it can't be argued the 360 will almost certainly do better here in the Land of the Rising Sun than the first 'Box did. How much better remains to be seen.

4 Legendary PS2 lineup

Take a look at our Top 10 Playable Demos... they're almost all PS2 games. Perhaps it's only logical that some of the finest games in a system's lineup come right at the end of it's life-cycle, and PS2 looks to be no exception. Titles like Shadow of the Colossus, Okami, and Soul Calibur III will more than keep you busy until the next generation arrives.

5 SOL!D EYE Tobidacid

We're not quite sure what to think about Kojima Productions's PSP doohickey, the "SOL!D EYE Tobidacid" (a pun on *tobidashi*, literally "jumping out"). So what exactly does it do? Strap it onto your system, peer through the stereo-optic lenses and play Metal Gear AC!D 2 in true 3-D. The effect is quite convincing, but is anyone really going to carry this behemoth around with them?

Top 5 disappointments

1 No playable PS3

Not a very big surprise, but still disappointing -- the only playable PS3s at the show were used by developers at stage events to show off games in realtime. I never thought I'd see the day that Microsoft stole Sony's thunder...in Japan, of all places.

2 Still no love for PSP

Where are the games? I predicted the PSP would grind DS into the dirt, and now I'm forced to consume fresh-baked humble pie by admitting the system I play most these days is, in fact...DS. This trend shows few signs of abating, as a positively *diaphanous* PSP lineup at TGS will attest. Shovelware ports to the system have to stop; original game development must begin. Titles like Extreme Ghouls 'n' Ghosts, Metal Gear AC!D 2, and EXIT are a step in the right direction.

3 Free Xbox360 HD in Japan for $50 less

What is Microsoft thinking? Not that I particularly begrudge the extra $50 Americans will have to pay for the "premium edition" of the 360 with hard-drive, it's the fact that everyone who purchases the system in Japan will have it standard. This could mean lots of Japan-only games that require a hard drive may never reach US shores.

4 No playable Final Fantasy XII

Directors stepping down, legions of key staff moving to Mistwalker, delayed for over a year -- is this game ever coming out? Yeah, it looks gorgeous, no complaints there. But it was playable at *last* year's E3. What gives?

5 Stingy PR people

Major Japanese game companies that shall remain unnamed refusing a press kit to a guy just 'cause he's from a foreign magazine. For shame.

Game of Show

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots PS3 Konami/Kojima Productions

No, it wasn't playable, but if Game of Show means the single game that got us the most excited, it's Hideo Kojima's latest pièce de résistance. Señor Snake owns you.



See full preview on page 048

BOOTH HIGHLIGHTS TGS2005

Sony



Despite devoting half their booth to a massive theater running video glimpses at many, many PS3 games (most of which were previously seen at E3 and/or PlayStation Meeting 2005), it was the current generation that really stood out. Sony had kiosks for every major PS2 game at the show set up, first and third-party alike, proving that it has the final days of the Sixth Era of video games wrapped up in a sweet-smelling package. Indeed, some of the most exciting PS2 games at the show are first/second party: Fumito Ueda's mesmerizing Shadow of the Colossus, Level 5 (Dark Cloud series, Dragon Quest VIII)'s brilliant-looking RPG Rogue Galaxy, and Polyphony Digital's "Gran Turismo with bikes", Tourist Trophy. PSP support was also robust – as it had better be, considering it's Sony's platform. With quirky action games (Locoroco, Ghost in the Shell), the almost-certainly Japan-only automatic English-to-Japanese translator/study tool Talkman, and Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner, an RPG from former Shin Megami Tensei producer Cozy Okada, it's clear Sony's not yet ready to admit defeat to Nintendo's DS.







WHAT WAS HOT

- Shadow of the Colossus -- PS2 -- Sony
- Rogue Galaxy -- PS2 -- Sony/Level 5
- Tourist Trophy -- PS2 -- Sony/Polyphony Digital
- Vision Gran Turismo -- PS3 -- Sony/Polyphony Digital
- Genji 2 -- PS3 -- Sony/Game Republic
- Armored Core 4 -- PS3/Xbox360 -- From Software
- Assassin -- PS3 -- Ubisoft
- Ghost in the Shell -- PSP -- Sony
- Talkman -- PSP -- Sony
- Locoroco -- PSP -- Sony
- Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner -- PSP -- Sony/Gaia









Microsoft







First playable Xbox360 is in *Japan*? Has the world gone mad? Or has Microsoft finally learned how to play the game here? A glance at the 14 playable 360 games at the booth would seem to suggest the latter. Among certain-to-fail-in-Japan-despite-obvious-quality games like Kameo were several titles aimed directly at the Japanese market – careful choices in tried-and-true genres by established creators. You've got your standard Final Fantasy-esque RPG ([eM]), your Dynasty Warriors *and* your Dynasty Warriors clone (Ninety-Nine Nights), your family board game (Everyparty), your MMORPG (FFXI), and your arcade racer (Ridge Racer 6). Despite these safe, tame choices and an incredibly ritzy booth, the scene at Microsoft was somewhat bleak. Nothing seemed to be getting a lot of attention from the Japanese gaming public – even on the general admittance days a wait to play was usually not required. Perhaps this is nothing more than general ennui-fallout from the disastrous showing the original Xbox made in Japan, but Microsoft's future in Japan still remains a giant question mark.

WHAT WAS HOT

- [eM] -eNCHANT arM **Xbox360** From Software
- Ninety-Nine Nights **Xbox360** Microsoft/Q Entertainment/Phantagram
- Everyparty **Xbox360** Microsoft/Game Republic
- Wrestle Kingdom **Xbox360** Yuke's
- Kameo: Elements of Power **Xbox360** Microsoft/Rare
- Call of Duty 2 **Xbox360** Activision
- Test Drive Unlimited **Xbox360** Atari
- Need For Speed Most Wanted **Xbox360** Electronic Arts









Konami





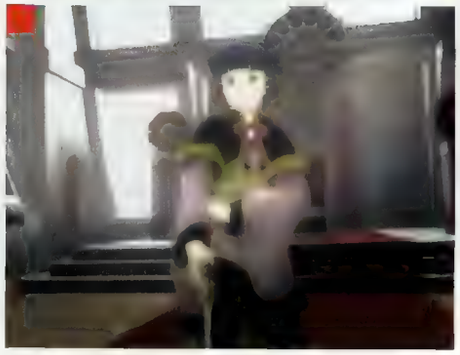


Like a white-hot platinum bullet to the brain, the MGS4 demonstration was the single most exciting thing at the show. Yes, it looks transcendent, yes, the themes and story are sure to be profound, the gameplay sublime – but hey wait a second, it's *full-realtime!* How do we know for sure? Hideo Kojima took to the stage once daily to randomly pause the demo, move the camera around and play with the lighting at will. Dubious Killzone demo, step aside, for the true harbinger of PlayStation 3's ungodly power hath arrived. Sadly, the rest of Konami's TGS lineup was fairly bloodless, though Suikoden V with its lightning-quick battles and gorgeous presentation looks set to restore fans' faith in the series. Other highpoints included the impossibly well-proportioned rasslin' babes of Rumble Roses XX, Metal Gear ACID 2 with its bizarre stereo-optic 3-D peripheral, and IGA's always-reliable Castlevanias.

WHAT WAS HOT

- Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots **PS3** Konami/Kojima Productions
- Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence **PS2** Konami/Kojima Productions
- Metal Gear ACID 2 **PSP** Konami/Kojima Productions
- Rumble Roses XX **Xbox360** Konami
- Suikoden V **PS2** Konami
- Suikoden Tactics **PS2** Konami
- Suikoden I & II **PS2** Konami
- Castlevania: Curse of Darkness **PSs/Xbox** Konami
- Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow **DS** Konami





Sega



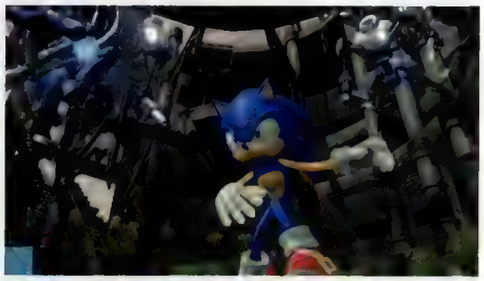


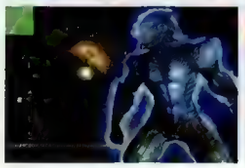


Is Sega's reliance on Yuji Naka getting a little scary, or is it just me? Almost half the prominent games at the booth are from The House That Built Sonic...not that you'll necessarily hear any complaints. Besides the sweeping majesty of the next-generation Sonic the Hedgehog, shown to the public for the first time, Sonic Team presented numerous toothsome offerings in the form of Sonic Riders, Phantasy Star Universe, Shadow the Hedgehog, and Sonic Rush. Additional PS3/360 love from Sega was slim, with only looks at slightly-further-along versions of Fifth Phantom Saga (FPS – get it?) and Chrome Hounds on display. Current-gen software, however, was abundant, with the stunning-looking Shenmue-esque Yakuza adventure Ryu Ga Gotoku leading the pack. Quality handheld software was also evident; sign me up now for Treasure's 4-player DS fighter Bleach, and the sequel to last year's zany Feel the Magic: XX/YY.

WHAT WAS HOT

- Sonic the Hedgehog **PS3/Xbox360** Sega/Sonic Team
- Phantasy Star Universe **PS2/PC** Sega/Sonic Team
- Sonic Riders **PS2/GC/Xbox** Sega/Sonic Team
- Shadow the Hedgehog **PS2/GC/Xbox** Sega/Sonic Team
- Sonic Rush **DS** Sega/Sonic Team
- Fifth Phantom Saga **PS3** Sega
- Chrome Hounds **Xbox360** Sega/From Software
- Ryu Ga Gotoku -- PS2 -- Sega
- Sega Rally 2006 -- PS2 -- Sega
- Gunstar Super Heroes -- GBA -- Sega/Treasure
- Bleach **DS** Sega/Treasure
- Where Do Babies Come From? / Feel the Magic XX/YY 2 **DS** Sega
- Guilty Gear XX #Reload **PSP** Sega/Arc System Works







Capcom



It's all about Okami. Though big-name franchises like Onimusha and Resident Evil commanded more floorspace, the mystical magic of Clover Studio's delirious sumi-e dream wafted throughout the crowd like the scent of joss sticks. The rest of Capcom's lineup was solid, if predictable. Shin Onimusha looks like more of the same (though without a real-life star providing the model for the hero), Beat Down is shaping up to be forgettable, and Resident Evil 4 is a port. Next-generation demos for Resident Evil 5 and Devil May Cry 4, though jaw-dropping, were clearly at the very earliest stages of development, and Dead Rising is in serious need of some optimization. Oddly enough the most exciting announcements came in the form of PSP games -- the long, long, *long*-awaited Ghouls 'n' Ghosts sequel, and fully polygonal remakes of the first entries in the Mega Man and Mega Man X series. If only other companies showed such love for the platform.





WHAT WAS HOT

- Okami **PS2** Capcom/Clover Studio
- Shin Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams **PS2** Capcom
- Beat Down **PS2/Xbox** Capcom
- Resident Evil 4 **PS2** Capcom
- Monster Hunter Dos **PS2** Capcom
- Resident Evil 5 **PS3/Xbox360** Capcom
- Dead Rising **Xbox360** Capcom
- Devil May Cry 4 **PS3** Capcom
- Devil May Cry 3: Special Edition **PS2** Capcom
- Extreme Ghouls 'n' Ghosts **PSP** Capcom
- Monster Hunter Portable **PSP** Capcom
- Viewtiful Joe Scratch! **PSP** Capcom
- Viewtiful Joe Battle Carnival **GC/PSP** Capcom
- Mega Man: Powered Up **PSP** Capcom
- Mega Man: Maverick Hunter X **PSP** Capcom
- Street Fighter Alpha 3 Double Upper **PSP** Capcom







Bandai-Namco



Bandai-Namco's first outing as a merged entity was decidedly Lucy-and-Desi-like, with each partner dividing half the booth -- still sleeping in separate beds, as it were. The combined lineup made for one of the most engaging booths at the show, however, with the next generation represented by the stunning Mobile Suit Gundam, the less-so Ridge Racer 6 (still very early in development), and "New Fighting Game", unchanged from E3. Current-gen receives its parting blessings in the form of the magnificent Soul Calibur III, Cyber Connect 2's impressive .hack//GU, and the newly-announced Samurai Champloo, based on Shinichiro Watanabe's anime of the same name. Handheld support was similarly laudable, with Katamari Damacy on PSP (yes!), Xenosaga I and II remade isometric-style on DS, and E3: Every Extend Extra, the latest puzzler/shooter/music game hybrid from loony genius Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Q Entertainment.



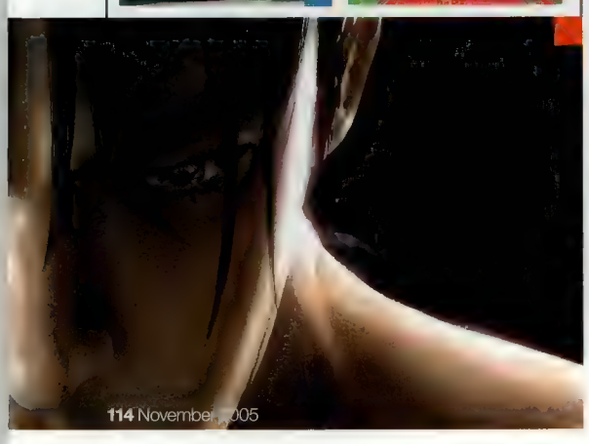


WHAT WAS HOT

Soul Calibur III **PS2** Bandai-Namco
Ridge Racer 6 **Xbox360** Bandai-Namco
Mobile Suit Gundam **PS3** Bandai-Namco
New Fighting Game **PS3** Bandai-Namco
.hack//GU -- PS2 -- Bandai-Namco/Cyber Connect 2
Samurai Champloo **PS2** Bandai-Namco
Tales of the Abyss **PS2** Bandai-Namco
Xenosaga Episode III **PS2** Bandai-Namco/Monolith
Baten Kaitos II **GC** Bandai-Namco/Monolith
Boku no Watashi no Katamari Damacy **PSP** Bandai-Namco
E3: Every Extend Extra **PSP** Bandai-Namco/Q Entertainment
Xenosaga I & II **DS** Bandai-Namco/Monolith
Neon Genesis Evangelion 2 **PSP** Bandai-Namco







Square Enix



Square-Enix's anemic TGS showing was more than a little disturbing, for a couple reasons. First, the booth itself was tiny compared to S-E's usual baroque bombast, and second because of the paucity of playable titles. Where's Final Fantasy XII? On video. Again. While it could be argued that Square-Enix chose instead to emphasize games that will be released first, the lack of the flagship title was felt especially strongly given its recent highly-publicized troubles. Luckily Kingdom Hearts II and Dirge or Cerberus are both shaping up to be stellar, Mana Project is enticing but still far off, and FFXI finally gets new jobs with its next expansion, Treasures of Aht Uhrgan.

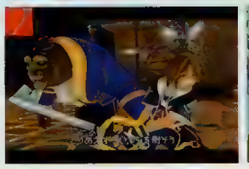


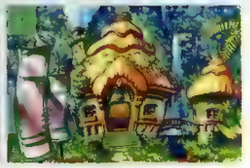


WHAT WAS HOT

Kingdom Hearts II **PS2** Square-Enix
Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII **PS2** Square-Enix
Final Fantasy XII **PS2** Square-Enix
Final Fantasy XI: Online: Treasures of Aht Uhrgan **PS2/PC/Xbox360** Square-Enix
Code Age Commanders **PS2** Square-Enix
Mana Project **DS** Square-Enix







Tecmo



Tomonobu Itagaki's Team Ninja continues to dazzle. Ninja Gaiden Black refines what was already near-perfection, and the curiously unplayable Dead Or Alive 4 gets augmented with more jaw-dropping visual effects every time it's shown. Word's still out on the gameplay, however, with no major system changes yet announced. Tecmo Classic Arcade, bizarrely enough only to be released on Xbox, continues the trend of emulated arcade collections of yesteryear, and the PSP receives a wink and a handshake in the form of unique action game Karakuri.



WHAT WAS HOT

Dead Or Alive 4 **Xbox360** Tecmo/Team Ninja
Ninja Gaiden Black **Xbox** Tecmo/Team Ninja
Karakuri **PSP** Tecmo
Monster Farm 5 **PS3** Tecmo
Tecmo Classic Arcade **Xbox** Tecmo





Koei



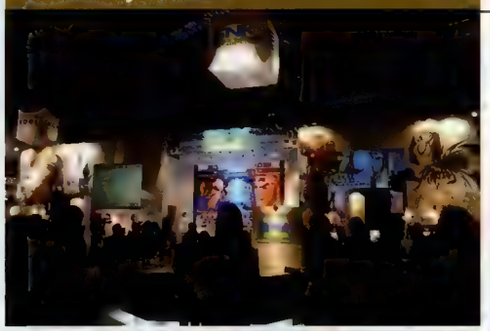
Arguably the strongest third-party next-gen showing at TGS. In addition to the previously announced Ni-Oh and Dynasty Warriors-derived "CG Concept Work" (unlikely to be used in an actual game, since Omega-Force has just announced their PS3 game as an all-new action game entitled Bladeforce), Koei also debuted the Canada-developed PS3 racer Fatal Intertia, looking quite spiffy in realtime, and had Dynasty Warriors 5 Special playable

WHAT WAS HOT

Fatal Intertia -- PS3 -- Koei/Omega-Force
CG Concept Work **PS3** Koei/Omega-Force
Dynasty Warriors 5 Special **Xbox360** Koei/Omega-Force
Ni-Oh **PS3** Koei
Samurai Warriors **PSP** Koei/Omega-Force



SNK Playmore



How much longer can this company continue to wring money out of its past? That was the question at SNK-Playmore's booth, featuring a massive display of ancient Shinkiro artwork and port upon port upon port of dated Neo-Geo fighters. Even its "new" games -- Neo-Geo Battle Coliseum and Samurai Spirits Tenkaichi Kenkyakuden -- make heavy use of recycled sprites from the Neo-Geo era. At least KOF Maximum Impact 2 could be considered a step in the right direction.



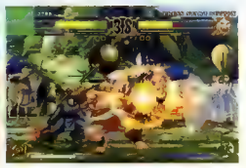


WHAT WAS HOT

King of Fighters Maximum Impact 2 **PS2** SNK-Playmore
Neo-Geo Battle Coliseum **PS2** SNK-Playmore
Samurai Spirits Tenkaichi Kenkyakuden **PS2** SNK-Playmore







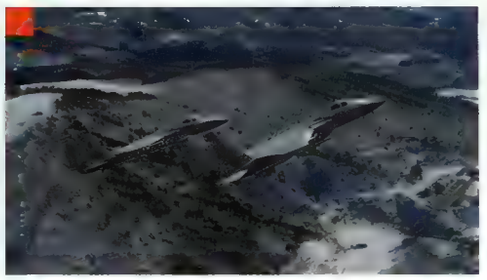
Taito



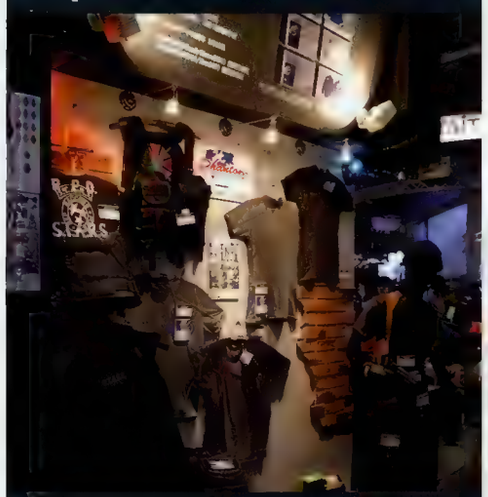
Taito, recently acquired by Square-Enix, proved it still exists with a sparse display of flight sim World Airforce on Xbox360, and the very promising stylish action game EXIT on PSP.

WHAT WAS HOT

World Airforce **Xbox360** Taito
EXIT **PSP** Taito



Shops



Shops? At a trade show? You'd better believe it. Seeing as how TGS is a *public* trade show, game companies waste no time setting up kiosks full of mouthwatering licensed products to bilk poor attendees out of their cash. Though actual game software is not sold, goods are, and in profusion. Selections range from plush Dragon Quest Slimes to replicas of accessories worn by Final Fantasy characters, cast in solid silver and costing hundreds of dollars.





Interviews

Interview #01

Developer: Sonic Team **Game:** Sonic Riders **Person:** Takashi Yuda

Interview by Nick Des Barres / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres





Mr. Yuda has been at Sega since 1990. He worked on all Sega-produced Disney Genesis games, and has been part of the Sonic series since 3. During the Saturn era he was involved in motion capture experimentation, and has since worked on titles as varied as Space Channel 5 and Puyo Puyo.

play: As a big fan of Sonic R on the Saturn, the first thing I noticed about Riders was the highlighted "R" in the logo. Does Riders share any connection with that game?
Takashi Yuda: No, not really. There had been a request from Sega for a new Sonic racing game, and in Japan the addition of an "R" to racing games is quite common. There's no important meaning behind the highlighted "R" in Riders.

So we won't be hearing any crazy vocal tunes then?
Not this time! You might hear a few keywords used as vocals here and there, but for Riders we're concentrating on conventional, upbeat race music.

I see -- so Riders is an entirely new vision. What kind of game can we expect? Straight-ahead racing, or more focus on inter-character combat?
It's a racing game at its core. But having said that, all characters in spinoff racing games often control exactly the same. For Riders, we're trying to make each character play uniquely and stay true to their Sonic roots, so action is also very important. For instance, the Turbulence System -- the main concept behind Sonic Riders -- when someone hits 180KPH, they create a wave of turbulence resembling a halfpipe behind them, which you can ride on, jump off of, and perform tricks on to catch up to your rivals. It's inspired by real racing techniques like utilizing a rival's slipstream.

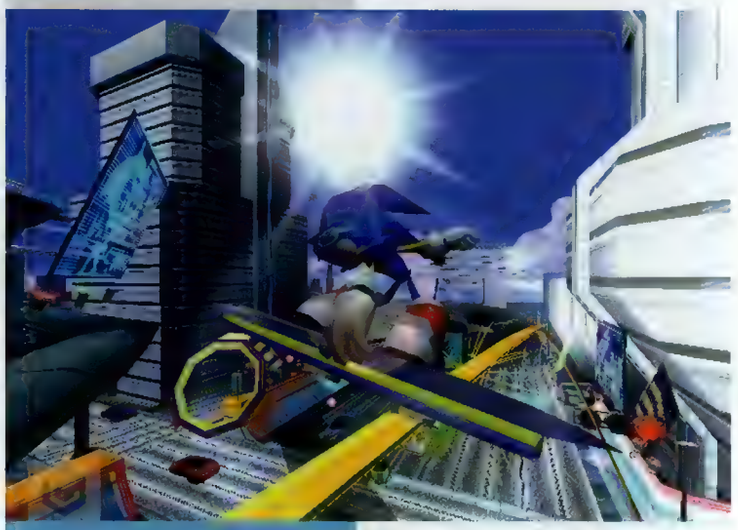
So the action elements aren't just a bonus -- they're an integral part of the game system.
That's right. You can catch up to whomever's ahead of you, but when you speed up you'll create your own wave of turbulence, which might be turned right back on you, creating a neck-and-neck effect.

Tell us more about the Turbulence System -- what's the gauge on the right side of the screen, for instance?
That's the Air Gauge. Put simply it's kind of like fuel. You can use it to perform maneuvers like dash and turbo, and to fill it back up you must perform tricks. Of course, the fancier your trick, the more spins it has, the more Air you'll charge. Also if you land properly from a trick you get a temporary boost of speed, so you'll be wanting to perform as many as you can. We think this element in particular sets Sonic Riders apart from other character-based racing games in terms of originality.

And the boards all the characters are riding? How do they work?
They work like the hoverboard in Back to the Future II (laughs). We've prepared about 40 boards total, which will gradually become available to the player as the game progresses. As I just said, the Air Gauge acts as their fuel, and should it run out entirely you'll get off the board and actually run on the track (laughs). There are places to restore your Air, but mainly you'll have to perform tricks to keep your gauge full. We're working on the balance so this will be fun and not tedious -- you won't have to be constantly worrying about your gauge.

What about the tracks themselves? Will we see a lot of classic Sonic-style loops and Moebius strips?
Of course, it's Sonic! Plenty of loops. There's a huge amount of tracks available to play on, too.

Are they totally linear, or are there shortcuts, hidden ways of getting the one-up on your opponents?
There are. You won't be able to just find them yourself, though, you'll have to use an opponent's turbulence to jump really far, for instance.



"For Riders, we're trying to make each character play uniquely and stay true to their Sonic roots, so action is also very important."

It's hard not to notice a lack of old-school Sonic characters in the announced playable lineup so far -- nearly half are new and all the old characters are heroes. Will we see villians like Shadow and Mecha Sonic return?
Yes, you will -- but we're placing a lot of emphasis on the story this time, so only characters that fit within the concept.

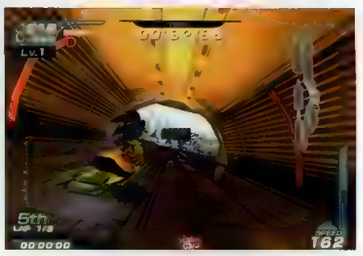
Emphasis on the story...in a racing game? Intriguing!
Well, it's still Sonic Vs. Eggman (laughs). The race is just a cover story for Eggman and a band of three thieves calling themselves Babylon, who are sort of manipulating him. The player will uncover the various mysteries behind these new characters and Eggman as the game progresses. I'll give you a hint, it involves a Chaos Emerald!

So the three new characters are villains? Can you choose them right from the start and see the story from the other side?
Not from the start. First you have to beat the game as Sonic, then as Tails, etc., to unlock them.

How many unlockable characters are you planning?
There are seven characters available from the start, so about ten extra hidden. Some don't have a story, however, and will only be playable in certain modes. Like the boards, you'll unlock them by performing various tasks and reaching certain goals.

Finally I'd like to ask a hardware question -- like most recent Sonic games, Riders is coming out on three platforms simultaneously. How do you manage to develop for three systems at once?
A: Well, development begins on one platform only, and proceeds on that platform until the game is good and ready, so it's not really that difficult at all. It's not as if we're building the game from the ground up on three platforms. As far as Sonic Riders is concerned, it's now up and running on all three consoles.





Interview #02

Developer: Treasure **Game:** Gunstar Super Heroes **Person:** Masato Maegawa

Interview by Nick Des Barres & Dai Kobama / Transcribed by Dai Kobama / Translated by Nick Des Barres





Mr. Maegawa began his career at Konami as a programmer, where he worked on Game Boy, NES, and SNES games, eventually becoming a director. After three years at the company he left to create Treasure, debuting in 1993 with the one-two punch of McDonald's Treasure Land Adventure and Gunstar Heroes on Genesis.

play: Treasure fans have been begging for a Gunstar Heroes sequel for twelve years. Why was now the right time?
Masato Maegawa: There are really two reasons. The first is that I would not make a sequel without the original staff. All of the people who worked on Gunstar are now able to direct their own games, and are almost always doing separate projects. It just so happened we all had a break in our schedules, and now was the time. Second, doing things our own way is sort of Treasure's style. We all had to agree on doing a new game, without any pressure from above.

So the original Gunstar and Super Heroes have exactly the same staff? That's unheard of!
Not exactly the same (laughs). We made the original with seven people including myself, and Super Heroes with six of those seven.

Gunstar Super Heroes shares a lot with its predecessor in terms of feeling and stage design -- do you consider it a remake, or a sequel?
Oh, it's an entirely new game. It's not as if we're re-using graphics, or anything. There are lots of places that are intentionally reminiscent of the original, and many that are not. So you could think of it as a sequel, certainly.

Why "Super", then? Why not Gunstar Heroes 2?
Hmm, mainly because it's different hardware. The theme of Super Heroes is "exhilaration." While we're keeping popular elements from the original like giant effects and multi-jointed bosses, the main concept behind Super Heroes is surpassing the original in every way. I think we've achieved that, and so by that logic it must be Super (laughs). By sticking a "2" on the title, we'd be saying to the world, "This is our sequel to Gunstar Heroes." I don't personally consider it a sequel.

It certainly is different hardware. The GBA is sort of known as a children's platform, and Treasure is known for their mindbendingly difficult games. How are you bringing those two disparate elements together?
Our core target is still hardcore gamers, so in Hard Mode especially, you'll definitely get a classic Treasure challenge. But don't worry, we're still thinking about the children (laughs). There's an Easy Mode, of course, and since the default control styles are a bit complex, we've added an Auto Mode with auto fire, so you can beat the game with just jumping.

Control styles? Separate from the difficulty setting? How many are there?
We wanted to make a game that anybody could play, so there are four -- two simple control schemes, and two reminiscent of the original.

How would you compare development between GBA and Genesis? Which was more difficult?
They're really similar actually (laughs). There are things we can do on the GBA that weren't possible on the Genesis and vice-versa. Our concept for Super Heroes was to take this extremely limited hardware, the GBA, and struggle to push it beyond those limits. It wasn't about, "How can we use this hardware feature?", but rather, "How can we use this hardware feature for something nobody's ever thought of?"

Sort of a fannish question, but I'm looking at the poster art right now, and this doesn't look like Han (ed. note -- character designer for Gunstar Heroes, Guardian Heroes, Radiant Silvergun, etc. etc.). Is it someone new?
You have a sharp eye (laughs)! The base character design is by Han, but for the actual art we wanted to raise the quality a bit so a different designer's touched it up a bit and done the coloring. I know it looks substantially different from his past stuff, but it's still Han.

So are this Red and Blue the same characters that were in the original?
Not exactly (laughs). We decided not to use anything from the original -- no graphics, no character designs. We purposely didn't look back at the first game, and asked ourselves, "What kind of game was Gunstar?" If we've done our jobs right everything will look familiar, but new.

We're definitely looking forward to it. What else is Treasure working on for Sega at the moment?
Right now we're doing a fighting game based on the manga/anime Bleach for the Nintendo DS. It's similar to a game we did on Megadrive called Yu Yu Hakusho, if you remember that.

Four players simultaneously?
Exactly. You'll be able to play four players at the TGS.

Can't wait to see it. Now let's talk about 2-D versus 3-D for a moment...do you see 2-D as fading away with the next generation of hardware, becoming viable only on handheld platforms?
Not at all. Personally, I want to make games with at least a 2-D control scheme for the rest of my life. We really don't have the desire to do any completely 3-D games. That doesn't mean we won't use 3-D graphics, of course -- on a high-spec system, even if the backgrounds and characters are polygons, we'll keep the core gameplay in two dimensions. To give you an example, in a fighting game, if you have two characters dueling on a 2-D plane, no problem, right? Start adding extra characters and planes and it gets distracting. For action titles, running around aimlessly in huge 3-D environments just isn't my idea of gameplay. At Treasure we make games: gameplay comes before graphics. Many, many titles in the past have made the mistake of reversing this priorty. At the end of the day 2-D would have been the right choice. I'm not saying it's the *best* choice, but it's often the only choice.

"Our core target is still hardcore gamers, so in Hard Mode especially, you'll definitely get a classic Treasure challenge."

That's a Treasure quote for the ages. While we're sort of on the subject of the past, any plans for more handheld remakes/sequels/ports? Dynamite Headdy? Silhouette Mirage? Sin & Punishment?
Not at the moment. In the case of Headdy I was the lead programmer on that game, and since I no longer program I don't think we'll ever revisit it. I don't think anyone else could understand that code (laughs). With Sin & Punishment we're sorry American fans never got a chance to play it, and we're always talking with Nintendo about how we'd like to do another game, but I don't think it's very suited to handheld play. I'm not totally ruling out any more handheld versions of past Treasure games, though.

What about shooters? We know Radiant Silvergun and Ikaruga were planned as parts one and two of a trilogy -- will we ever get to see the final installment?
They are part of a trilogy, and the basic ideas for the third one are there. The only problem is, when are we going to be able to make it (laughs)? Our staff is comparatively tiny, so we're only able to do one original game every two or so years. Please be patient (laughs).

We'll try! Finally, if you have a word for American Treasure fans...
We're mostly known for our action games, so we probably have more American fans than Japanese. Please look forward to Gunstar Super Heroes!



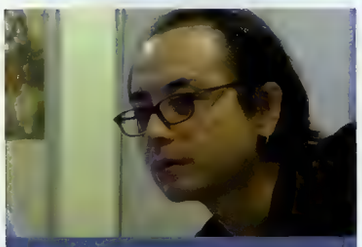




Interview #03

Developer: Konami TYO **Game:** Rumble Roses XX **Person:** Akari Uchida

Interview by Nick Des Barres / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres



Mr. Uchida started his career making PC office software, and joined Konami in 1995. Until recently he has worked mainly on games targeting the Japan market only. Rumble Roses for PS2 was his first major worldwide title.



play: The original Rumble Roses was for PS2. Why make the jump to 360, rather than wait for PS3?
Akari Uchida: Why? Because Microsoft gave us lots of money (laughs)! No, I'm kidding, that's just a joke. No, it's really a joke, I swear (laughs). Basically we just wanted to use new hardware. For the first Rumble Roses, it was a tough decision between making the most beautiful models possible, or adding a tag mode. Since that game has been released we've gotten a bit of criticism about the lack of tagging, so we wanted to bring that feature to the fans as fast as possible. And, well, the Xbox 360 comes out first, so (laughs)...

So is this more of an update to the original Rumble Roses, rather than a sequel?
Other than the characters and general controls, it's all new. The models, the motions, the backgrounds -- everything's been redone from top to bottom. It was a necessity, since the power of the 360 demands models of a quality roughly equivalent to what we used to use for prerendered cutscenes on PS2. For instance, each character in XX uses about 50,000 polygons. That's five times what we were using in the first Rumble Roses. It cost a lot of money (laughs).

Can we expect new characters?
Hmm...I can't say there won't be any new characters at all, but we're not really thinking about it right now. In the first game your character could become a face or a heel, and in XX we've added a third mode, Superstar, for all ten characters. Superstar mode comes in both face and heel flavors, by the way. Your costumes and attacks will change, so it's basically like having double the characters. I think it should feel pretty fresh.

While we're on the subject of characters, it was just announced that Reiko from Rumble Roses is going to be a playable character in Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence. Might we see some cross-promotion here? EVA appearing as a wrestler in XX for example...?
Well...Mr. Kojima's asked me not to say anything yet so my lips are sealed (laughs). Sort of unrelated, but you remember Lady X Substance from the original? This time there's a Lady X Subsistence (laughs).

Getting back to the hardware, Rumble Roses is known for perhaps the best in-game models of the female form ever seen. How are you using the 360 to improve them?
The new technology allows us to do some really amazing things, especially with muscle movement, expansion and contraction. Also the texture resolution has increased dramatically so we're able to add tiny skin details and such. We're no longer able to cheat with anime-style exaggeration or deformation, so the models have also become a lot more realistic.

How far do you think you've pushed the Xbox360? Is there still room to grow, more to learn?
Of course. This is our first game out of the gate, so I wouldn't presume to say we're using the hardware at full spec. However, we're developing the game in consultation with technical experts from Microsoft, and we're both pretty satisfied with how it's turning out. Some of the other next-generation demos I've been seeing lately are kind of suspicious -- is it real-time? Is it prerendered? I can tell you we're full real-time, but you can't really compare such things (laughs).





"Other than the characters and general controls, it's all new. The models, the motions, the backgrounds -- everything's been redone from top to bottom."



How will you be able to use Xbox Live with the game?
You'll be able to fight tag-match style online. This is something I've really always dreamed about, a kind of virtual arcade. It's very exciting.

Will both Silver and Gold users be able to play?
Of course. No restrictions.

One of our favorite things about the first game was the funky Story Mode. Are you expanding it for XX?
Well...we...we got a lot of complaints about Story Mode from America so we cancelled it (laughs)!

What? No! Everyone loved it!
Don't worry, there's plenty of new modes to take its place (laughs).

What about the Mad Mud matches?
The mud wrestling was fun, but didn't really add anything to the game, so we passed on it. Again, trust me, we've got better stuff planned this time (laughs). I can't really say anything more yet but...we're preparing a new mode called Queen's Match that I think will be very popular. Please look forward to it!

No Story mode? No Mad Mud? Queen's Match had better be 2 on 2!
What should I say...it's sort of a mode where terms like 1 on 1 and 2 on 2 don't mean anything anymore (laughs). If I told you what it was I know you'd really get excited about it. Just wait a little longer (laughs)!

What other new modes are you planning?
Lots (laughs). For example...the guys at Yuke's, our co-developers, were talking like, "Wouldn't it be fun to see these girls in a Tekken-style game?" Well, they went and made it (laughs). It seems they were getting bored with just making wrestling games, so they created new attacks with fast, Tekken-style motions, set a fixed camera and a one-minute timer like a standard fighting game. But we didn't want it to be like most fighting games where you have to learn several pages of moves to even start playing, so you can also use the familiar controls from the main mode. It's still in development so I can't say much more, but it's going to be a lot of fun. "If we're going Tekken-style," I said, "you gotta add a bear and a panda (laughs!)" No, I'm not joking! They'll be in there. We're through with the comparisons to DOA, next we're taking on Tekken (laughs)!

What about character customization? That was a feature that would have added a lot to the original.
Oh boy...then you'll be very happy to see...no, I can't really talk about it yet but it's going to be awesome (laughs)! I hope when people see our character customization, they'll be like, "Oh man, that's so Rumble Roses!"

Looking forward to it! Finally, if you have anything to say to your American fans...
We added tag matches so buy Rumble Roses XX! No more excuses (laughs)!

Interview #04

Developer: Konami TYO **Game:** Castlevania Series **Person:** Koji Igarashi

Interview by Nick Des Barres / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres



Mr. Igarashi, known as IGA in staff roles, started at Konami in 1991. The first game he worked on was Detana!! Twinbee. He followed up with the huge PC Engine hit Tokimeki Memorial, and has been producing the Castlevania series since the legendary Symphony of the Night in 1997.

play: Mr. Igarashi, we'd first like to let you know that Dawn of Sorrow received a 9.5 and was our Game of the Month for October.

Koji Igarashi: Wow! Thank you very much.

How were you able to make a game with such massive volume in a comparatively short amount of time?
It wasn't easy. First we assembled the core staff from the previous game, Aria of Sorrow, then further bolstered the team with lots of experienced people from Konami TYO. We were also able to bring a lot of sprites in from Symphony and other past games, touch them up and use them on the DS, something that wasn't possible before.

Why the change to a more anime-style look for Dawn of Sorrow?
A couple reasons. First, Ayami Kojima is brilliant but she's not very fast (laughs). Since Curse of Darkness was under development at the same time, I elected to have her concentrate on the PS2 game. Also, even though Aria of Sorrow was very well received, a lot of lesser titles did much better business. I think with Aria we may have missed our target audience a bit. Younger gamers tend not to like Miss Kojima's more aesthetic style so much, so we went with a more general anime look for Dawn.

I think most of our readers will have played Dawn of Sorrow by now (ed. note -- and if you haven't, go buy it), so I'll move on to Curse of Darkness. A lot of people who didn't like Lament of Innocence so much feel that Curse finally gets Castlevania in 3-D right, but just as many argue the series should stay 2-D. What do you think?
It's the history (laughs). When you have a series with so much history in 2-D it's tough to break away. Of course it's possible to make great games in 2-D, but I also think that it's possible to exhaust that history. As far as 3-D goes there's always room for improvement, and we're ready to meet the challenge. With Curse of Darkness, we feel we did everything we could with the current generation of hardware, but there are still things I'm not entirely satisfied with. I'm confident we'll be able to make even more fun innovations in 3-D moving into the next generation.

Speaking of fun innovations, we really like the Innocent Devil System. Is it planned as a one-shot or will you bring it back like the Tactical Soul System in Aria and Dawn?
I'm waiting to hear gamers' reactions first. I'm fond of the system myself and there was a lot more I wanted to do with it, so I guess my answer is, I'd love to revisit it if given the chance. But having said that, I think 3-D holds so many more possibilities. I'll give it more thought when we start making the next Castlevania. It's fun to wipe the slate clean and start with an all-new system, but it's just as fun to refine an existing one. But like I say, first I have to hear the reactions.

Every game in the series you've produced since Symphony has had at least one hidden character. Any hints on who it will be for Curse? I'm thinking Trevor, or Isaac...?

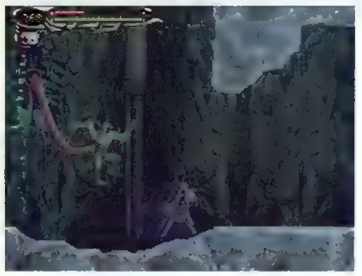
> "Of course it's possible to make great games in 2-D, but I also think that it's possible to exhaust that history."

I can't say anything concrete of course, but if you're expecting a cool hidden character I don't think you'll be disappointed. Who it is is still a secret (laughs). Speaking of Trevor, he's actually one of your enemies this time. And so is Isaac, so keep thinking (laughs).

Are any enhancements planned for the Xbox version?
Both are coming out at the same time, so there's very little difference between the two versions. The biggest thing is that the Xbox version supports true 5.1 Dolby Digital surround. The PS2 version is Pro Logic II.

I'm wondering how your collaborations with Ayami Kojima and Michiru Yamane work. Do you have lots of instructions, or do you just sort of let them do what they like?
It's pretty much the same with both of them -- first I explain the general world setting and story, then let them do what they please. That's not to say I won't occasionally have changes made, of course. In the case of Miss Kojima, she might call me up wanting a more in-depth explanation of some aspect of a character, so I'll look at her rough sketches and walk her through the details. What we talk about most often is color. First we determine an image color for the character and build details from that. Regarding Miss Yamane...I really just leave everything to her (laughs). It's okay to leave geniuses alone, you know what I mean (laughs)? I only speak up if I really don't like something, which is almost never. Miss Yamane has excellent communication with the rest of the team, too, for example she'll have the staff show her images of the areas, combine it with the story I've written in her head, and compose from that.





I'd like to ask some general series-related questions if I may. Fans love to speculate about just what happened in 1999 when Julius Belmont finally defeated Dracula... will this event ever be seen *in* a game?
Oh, I've got it all planned out (laughs). But I'm worried that when and if I make it as a game, it'll be sort of be like Star Wars Episode III, where you knew exactly what was going to happen (laughs). But as I say, I have it all thought out, exactly how Julius manages to finish Dracula off forever, so please wait a little bit longer.

The other main mystery in the storyline is whether or not Matthias Cronqvist from Lament of Innocence really is Dracula...
He is. After the events of Lament, he relocates to Wallachia and eventually becomes known as Dracula.

Is one of the reasons you set Lament of Innocence so early, in the 11th century, to open up an almost 400-year timespan for future Castlevanias between Lament and Castlevania 3 chronologically?
Actually...I think the first time the Belmonts and Dracula meet again is in Castlevania 3. If I was to set a game during that time period, it would be more about, how did the Belmonts manage to track Matthias so long? Being a vampire hunter doesn't just mean Dracula, so who else were they hunting? If we were to throw a light on what Dracula was doing during this time period, I think he'd be living pretty peacefully (laughs).

I'm sorry if I sound pesky, but is there any chance we'll ever see another 2-D Castlevania on a home console?
It's a really tough question. There's no doubt the market demands mostly 3-D games. Speaking personally, I prefer 2-D, but...how to realize that in this day and age is difficult. As a company, of course, Konami has to think in terms of products to sell, and if they don't, our development budgets for next time will be cut (laughs). So, everyone, please buy Curse of Darkness first (laughs)! If you want 2-D, please tell us. The market has to speak.

I don't think it's nearly as bleak a picture as you're painting...especially in America, where Symphony of the Night is widely regarded as one of the best games ever made.
I'm certainly not ruling 2-D out entirely. I think we made some great games on GBA and DS, but our sales expectations for the portable titles aren't that large. If one of the portable titles were to do huge business, we'd be able to convince people, "this could work on a home console too!" Unfortunately, there are a lot of users who won't even touch a game if it's 2-D. I'm aware there are probably just as many, if not more, who would prefer a 2-D game, but for most people looking at the market it seems like 2-D is supported only by certain hardcore fans.

To wrap up, a question from our Editor-in-Chief. Do you dream in 2-D or 3-D?
I wonder (laughs). It seems like I haven't dreamt in quite a while... I wonder why I can't remember any of my dreams lately? I wonder if it means I've lost my innocence (laughs). I used to dream a lot about creating stories... I'd say they were 3-D. I remember the camera moving around a lot (laughs). Yeah, I shoot my dreams like the film director Akio Jissoji. They're definitely 3-D (laughs).

I see (laughs). Finally, if you have a word for your American fans...
Well, two Castlevanias are coming out this year. Dawn of Sorrow is a classic 2-D game, and I think the Tactical Soul System is a lot of fun. Please buy it (laughs). Of course you'll want to buy the other game too (laughs)! Curse of Darkness is our new 3-D title, which will let you explore huge areas together with your demon familiar. The first pressing comes with a soundtrack CD composed by Michiru Yamane, who was nominated last year at the GDC Awards in the music category, so please pre-order!

Interview #05

Developer: Konami TYO **Game:** Suikoden Tactics & Suikoden V **Person (s):** Junko Kawano, Noritada Matsukawa & Osamu Komuta

Interview by Nick Des Barres & European press / Transcribed by Dai Kondo / Translated by Nick Des Barres



Miss Kawano has been with the Suikoden series since I, for which she acted as character designer. She has since released the critically-acclaimed PS2 adventure game, Shadow of Destiny, and produced/directed/wrote/character-designed Suikoden IV. Mr. Matsukawa is the general producer for the Suikoden series, and Mr. Komuta is the director of Suikoden Tactics.

Play: We know Suikoden Tactics takes place in the setting of IV, the Island Nations, but does it come before or after in the chronology?
Kawano: The game begins before the events of IV, and ends after its conclusion. It's really long (laughs).

Play: So will you be able to import save data from IV?
Kawano: Yes. There will be special rewards for people who've played IV.

European press: Are you totally satisfied with the results of Suikoden Tactics?
Kawano: Hmm...we're really tired (laughs). Yes, we think we did our absolute best.

European press: IV was not that successful...do you think you'll be able to recapture the market with this different style of gameplay in Tactics?
Matsukawa: This time the genre is strategy simulation, so we really concentrated on making a great battle system, something which is new for the series. I hope people enjoy it.

Kawano: It's sort of experimental.

Konami liaison: I have a question for you, if you don't mind...why do you think IV was not that successful? We consider it a success.

European press: I don't know, maybe people were expecting too much...

Play: I think people may have been expecting a sequel to I, II and III, rather than a prequel.
Konami liaison: Ah.

Play: The character designs for Tactics don't seem to be by Miss Kawano. Are they a new illustrator?
Kawano: No, they're by me (laugh). I purposely changed my style for Tactics, to fit in with the new feeling and genre.

Play: Miss Kawano, I'm a huge personal fan of yours and even I couldn't tell you drew this (refers to Tactics cover illustration). This is your art??
Kawano: It's kind of an experimental style. I wonder what Suikoden fans will think (laughs).

European press: What was the most difficult aspect of production for Tactics?
Komuta: The game system. We'd never done a strategy game before, so it was fairly difficult. From a technical perspective, we were really able to push the limits of the hardware, with 30 to 40 different characters on screen at once.

Play: Do you ever get worried that the dense Suikoden backstory might be shutting out new users?
Kawano: With Tactics, while knowledge of the previous games will certainly enchance your experience, it's not necessary. You can definitely enjoy it as is.

Play: How much can we ask about V? I think the thing Suikoden fans are most anxious to hear about is where it comes in the timeline...is it another prequel, or a sequel to I, II and III?
Kawano: That's the real question, isn't it (laughs)?

Matsukawa: That's a little bit too central to be talking about just yet (laughs).

Konami liaison: What would be your guess (laughs)?

Play: I would guess it takes place close to I, II and III even if it's not a sequel. When one thinks of the Queendom of Falena (ed. note -- announced setting for V) popular characters like Killey and Lorelai come to mind, and then there's the issue of Georg...
Matsukawa: Well...people who know that much about Suikoden, we won't be betraying them. I can't tell you when it takes place yet, though (laughs). We wouldn't set the game in Falena without a good reason to.

Play: What about Yuber and Pesmerga? Will we ever get to see their final conflict?
Matsukawa: That's one of many Suikoden subplots we're going to come back to eventually, dealing with them one at a time. For example the issue of Georg, the regicide. You'll get to see that episode in V.

> "It's been ten years since the first Suikoden, it's the tenth anniversary, so we want to challenge the new."

European press: If this game is a success would you consider more strategy games in the series?
Matsukawa: Tactics is sort of like the culmination of the Suikoden series's battle system. If people like it we'll definitely continue.

Play: Who are the scenario writer and character designer for V? This time I'm positive it isn't Miss Kawano's work (laughs).
Matsukawa: That's top secret (laughs). We'll be announcing them soon.

Play: Might the story be by Yoshitaka Murayama...? (Ed. note -- Creator of the Suikoden series and author of I, II and III. Left Konami in 2001 to form Blue Moon Studio, a game scenario-writing company.)
Matsukawa: Well...he's not with Konami any more, so (laughs)...

European press: What is it like for Miss Kawano, being a woman in the game industry?
Kawano: Things have changed a lot. In the past a woman in the game industry was almost heretical, but now there are many more female gamers, and consequently a lot more women coming into the industry.

European press: What are your thoughts on how women are depicted in games themsleves?
Kawano: I don't think it's that much different from what men think (laughs). When I see a sexy, powerful female game character, I just think, "that's cool!" For me personally, there's never really been a case when it was, "that's too much!", or "that's just gross!"

Play: For IV the concept was, "returning to the series's roots." What would you say the theme, or concept of V will be?
Matsukawa: It's been ten years since the first Suikoden, it's the tenth anniversary, so we want to challenge the new. Hence strategy. Hence changing the style of the art. The game experience of V itself will be quite original, I think. V will also be very experimental for the series, for instance we're totally changing the look of the characters. For the users who want nostalgia, we're releasing I & II on PSP.

European press: Now that the development of Tactics is complete, what aspect of the game would you say you're most satisfied with?

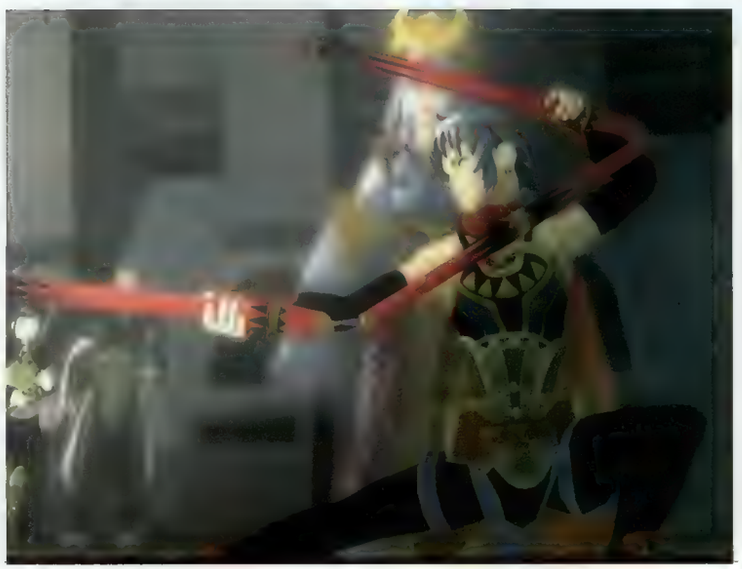
Komuta: I'll just be happy if people who play the game come back to us with, "it was fun!"

Matsukawa: The reviews in Japan are already very good. We're quite satisfied.

Play: Finally, if you have a word for American Suikoden fans...
Matsukawa: For Tactics we really put all our efforts into making a great battle system. Suikoden fans aren't going to want to miss it. For V, in addition to a new battle system we've completely overhauled the design. I hope people have fun with them both.

Kawano: I think this new battle system and style of play will be appreciated worldwide. Please do play Suikoden Tactics if you get the chance.

Komuta: We really put our all into the battle system this time. Tactics is also quite long and packed with hidden features, while at the same time retaining that core "Suikoden-ness." Please enjoy it.



Interview #06

Developer: Q Entertainment / Phantagram **Game:** Ninety-Nine Nights **Person(s):** Tetsuya Mizuguchi & Sangyoun Lee

Interview by Assorted Members of the International Press / Transcribed by Nick Des Barres / Translated by nobody because Mr. Mizuguchi speaks fluent English



Mr. Mizuguchi (above left) joined Sega in 1990, where he produced arcade games such as Sega Rally, Sega Touring Car Championship, and Manx TT Superbike. He later moved on to consumer software development where he created the Space Channel 5 series and Rez. He left Sega to establish Q Entertainment in 2003, and has since released the handheld puzzle games Meteos and Lumines to much acclaim.

Mr. Lee (above right)founded Seoul-based Phantagram in 1994, where his first project was an action game for PC called Blade Warrior. Phantagram's first worldwide success was with the 1999 Kingdom Under Fire, which has since become a franchise on PC and Xbox.

Ninety-Nine Nights represents the first collaboration between Q and Phantagram.

Q: How did the collaboration between Q and Phantagram come about?
Lee: Microsoft introduced Q and Phantagram. While we were discussing a possible Xbox360 version of Kingdom Under Fire, they suggested, why not work together? Mr. Mizuguchi and I have a very similar vision of games, our ideas are very similar. Mr. Mizuguchi isn't just looking at the Japanese market; he's very open to the world. Cooperation has been very smooth. I'm very happy working with Q.

Mizuguchi: Yeah, I'm happy too!

Q: This game is very different from Mr. Mizuguchi's past works, whether it be Sega Rally or Lumines. Have you been able to bring elements from these titles into the action genre?
Mizuguchi: I don't care about genre. It's not complicated, it's very simple...I care about what is fun. A good game should have a good balance between what's physical and emotional. That's all that matters.

Play: I'm curious about how development duties are being shared between Q and Phantagram.
Mizuguchi: Q Entertainment is responsible for the storyline, game concept, and world concept. Phantagram is actually making the game – game design, level design, the programming technologies. They're a great studio with very powerful programmers, great art skills. It's really good chemistry.

Play: Do you see yourselves working on future projects together?
Mizuguchi: Yeah, I hope so.

Lee: We're thinking about developing a music game together, too.

Q: This new intro showing at TGS showcases the individual player characters from Ninety-Nine Nights for the first time, and has opened up a lot of curiosity – what can you elaborate on at this point about them?

Mizuguchi: You can play seven characters total. At TGS we've announced six characters, but one of them is still secret – we're keeping it a secret until launch day. I think it'll be a big surprise. Five of the characters are human beings, and two are other races (ed. note – which means the secret character will not be human). Everyone has justice in this world. Everyone has family, friends, their own fate. Everyone is thinking, what is justice? Why do we have to fight each other? Especially the playable character at TGS, Inphyy – she lost her father to goblin soldiers when she was very young, about seven. But the goblin soldier you can play had his brother killed by humans, too. It's kind of a chain. Everyone is thinking about the future of society – their society, their family and friends. Movies can only show a story from one point of view, usually from the side of "justice". Human beings hate war, but we can't seem to stop it. Why? I've always wanted to put this kind of element into a game, and now, finally, with this high-def technology it's possible. We can now introduce highly emotional aspects into a game, not just physical pleasure.

Play: So you'll be able to see the story of Ninety-Nine Nights from multiple angles.
Mizuguchi: That's right, yeah. Each character has their own perspective, their own story. Sometimes they'll encounter each other – for example one of the other player characters might tempt you, go here, go there. But you have to decide for yourself. It's your future.

Play: The story is non-linear?
Mizuguchi: No, I'd say it's linear. The story itself is linear, although depending on your choices some characters have multiple endings.

Q: Is this primarily a one-player experience? Are you planning any network multi-player features?
Mizuguchi: Well, we haven't decided yet, but we're being very aggressive about it. We'll definitely have Xbox Live features, whether it's downloads or whatever, but we haven't worked out the details yet.

Play: I remember Mr. Lee back at E3 saying the goal was to have 2,000 enemies on screen at once. Have you met that goal yet?
Lee: In this build we have 1,000 characters on screen, but yes, we still expect the final version to have 2,000.

Mizuguchi: So that means twice what you see here (laughs). They're still optimizing.



"Human beings hate war, but we can't seem to stop it. Why?"

Lee: The final devkit was released a little bit later than our expectations, so the optimization is a little behind.

Q: What are some of the environmental hazards you'll run into? We see falling boulders on this one...
Mizuguchi: We're preparing lots of stages, including castles and cities. They're really like showcases of AI and physics – you'll see fire hazards, water hazards, cannons, explosions, falling bodies (laughs).

Q: Originally I think this was being considered as a title for the Japan launch, but now I'm hearing it's being re-evaluated for a possible worldwide launch (ed. note – Ninety-Nine Nights has been pushed back to January for Japan).
Mizuguchi: We've got a big mission, to make this game a success in the Japanese market first. Of course we're also keeping the worldwide market in mind. Everything – the character design, art, world, music, and concept is keeping this in mind. As far as the localization of dialogue goes, we're using lipsync technology so it should be easy.

Q: I noticed you yesterday on the floor watching other people playing the game. What's that like, seeing a game coming from concept stages all the way until a consumer can actually play it?
Mizuguchi: Not so many people understand what's happening in this game yet. I think this is a good intro, the TGS version, but people won't really know what this game is about until the final version is released. I think people are feeling something from this version, though. I hope so (laughs).

Play: What does the title, Ninety-Nine Nights, refer to? Is it a story element?
Mizuguchi: Yeah, it's a story element, but we're keeping it secret, what the Ninety-Nine Nights are. I'm really fond of this title.

Q: Do you think you'll be developing more games that have a sort of global view from now on? Do you think there's still a lot of difference between what's appreciated in different territories?
Mizuguchi: I think many developers in Japan, most developers, are just paying attention to the Japanese market. But we, Q Entertainment, and Phantagram also, we're always watching the worldwide market. And Microsoft is of course a worldwide company. This makes for excellent chemistry. I think we're making a worldwide title. But what do you think – would this style of gameplay be weird for US and European customers? Is it okay?

Q: (Various members of the press give their response; universal enthusiasm)
Mizuguchi: I have a question!

Play: Please, go ahead (laughs).
Mizuguchi: If we were going to change something for the US and European market...character designs, or music or something...should we change anything?

Q: (Various members of the press give their response; the general feeling is don't change anything)
Mizuguchi: What about online play? Is it necessary?

Q: (Various members of the press give their response; network co-op play would be a huge asset)
Mizuguchi: Hmm...

Q: Is online co-op possible?
Mizuguchi: (Smiles knowingly, all laugh) So, how's this interview going for you (laughs)?

Lee: We definitely want to add more Xbox Live features, but nothing's decided yet.

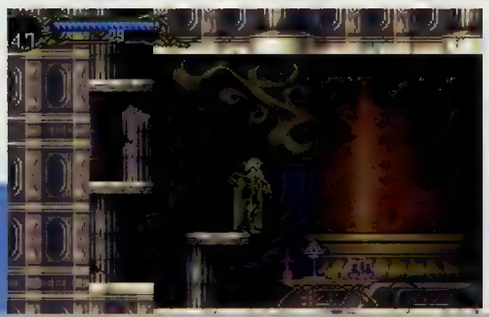
Play: I guess if we could conclude with a message for your overseas fans...
Mizuguchi: Sure. We're thinking about the hi-def experience. We want to make it a new experience. We're taking it to the next level (laughs)! We're working to get this game into the Western markets as soon as possible.

Lee: I just really hope Western users enjoy this game.

PlayStation 10th Anniversary



It's hard to believe that it's been ten years since we marveled at Ridge Racer at home or experienced the first 3D fighter in Battle Arena Toshinden. It was just the beginning of an awkward but inspiring ride as Sony ushered in the transition from 2D to 3D gaming—a road littered with broken dreams on top of visionary gold. The Sega Saturn rose up to nip at Sony's invading heels but made the mistake of trying to compete in 3D rather than innovate with more stunning 2D offerings like Astal, resulting in a swift defeat, while Nintendo worked their own bit of 3D magic with the Nintendo 64. When the dust settled, however, it was Sony who reigned supreme. Entering the market as a result of a Nintendo deal gone awry they managed to conquer the industry with their very first console. The PlayStation changed gaming forever, and it doesn't look like they're going to let up anytime soon. Dave Halverson





play Staff Top 25 US PlayStation All Time

1. Castlevania Symphony of the Night *Konami*

2. Final Fantasy VII *Square*
3. Metal Gear Soild *Konami*
4. Crash Bandicoot *SCEA*
5. Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus *GT*
6. Resident Evil *Capcom*
7. Tomb Raider *Eidos*
8. Silent Hill *Konami*
9. Final Fantasy IX *Square*
10. Vagrant Story *Square*
11. Klonoa *Namco*
12. Street Fighter Alpha 3 *Capcom*
13. Chrono Cross *Square*
14. Wipeout *SCEA*
15. PaRappa The Rappa *SCEA*
16. Grandia *SCEA*
17. Gran Turismo *SCEA*
18. Tekken 3 *Namco*
19. Jumping Flash 2 *SCEA*
20. Ridge Racer *Namco*
21. Silhouette Mirage *Working Designs*
22. Final Fantasy Tactics *Square*
23. Vandal Hearts *Konami*
24. Medievil *SCEA*
25. Parasite Eve *Square*

Top Fifteen Rare or Sleeper / Honorable Mentions

1. Hermie Hopperhead: 2D platforming *SCEA/Yuke's Japan Only*
2. Tail of the Sun: First Open World 3D Action Game *SCEA*
3. Rakugaki Showtime: 3D Fighting *Treasure Japan Only*
4. Blaster Master: Blasting again: Driving/Action *Sunsoft*
5. Tai Fu Wrath of the Tiger: Action *Activision*
6. Destrega: Extraordinary Arena Fighter *Koei*
7. C-12: Final Resistance: *SCEE Cambridge Studios* **(released well into the PS2's reign) SCEA**
8. Fear Effect Retro Helix: Sexiest PS Action Game *Eidos*
9. Tomba 2: 2D gameplay with 3D elements and graphics *Whoopee Camp/SCEA*
10. Motor Toon Gran Prix: Rubbery toon-based Racing *SCEA*
11. Wild 9: Action, Heavy Metal, and Torture as the main play mechanic *Shiny*
12. Strider 2: Amazing (but too easy) follow up to the arcade classic *Capcom*
13. Wild Arms: RPG The first and best in the series *SCEA*
14. Brave Fancer Musashi: Square's first 3D action game *Square*
15. Ape Escape: First Dual Analog Action Game: *SCEA*

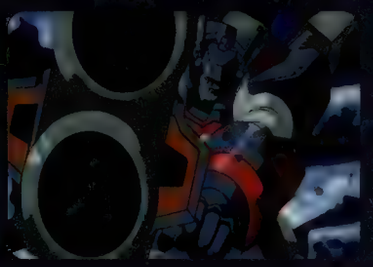
Best game that never was:
Thrill Kill: Never Released due to censorship... Find it Online!




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Godanner

Heavy metal marriage

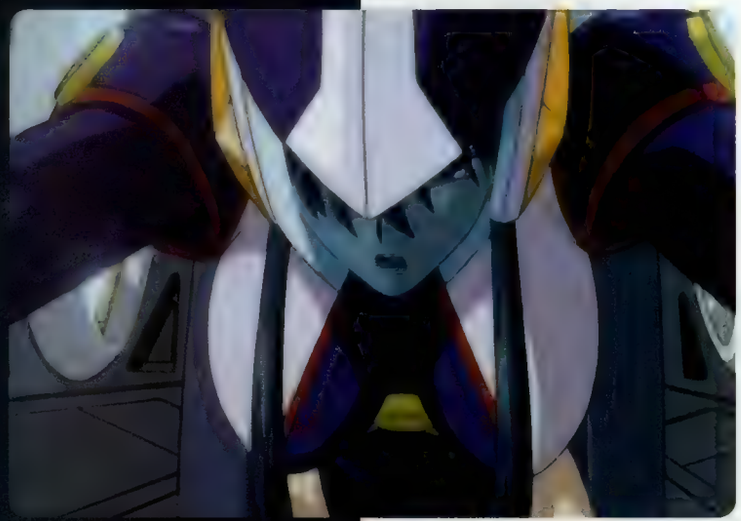
"Like all the best series, there is much diversion in the midst..."

As Godannar gets underway, a bold Dannar pilot (as in giant flying robot) Goh—defending Japan from an invading Mimetic invader beast—takes time out of his busy schedule protecting the planet to rescue a young girl (Anna Aoi) from becoming spatula fodder as she is rocked out of a fleeing helicopter and sent plummeting to Earth— common enough ground for your run-of-the-mill mecha mélange scenario—only Godannar isn't run-of-the-mill. Fast forward five years and Goh and Anna (now 16 and much his junior) are being married, but before the procession commences a new threat appears and Goh is summoned into battle. Cue the tangled web. Much earlier Goh had lost his first wife and co-pilot in battle so he is, to say the least, wary of letting Anna anywhere near the combat zone, especially since the Mimetic beasts have been attacking more frequently and are still highly unpredictable. Meanwhile, Anna just happens to be the daughter Kiriko Aoi, commander of the Japanese Branch of the Dannar offensive.

Back to the attack, Goh (on his wedding day no less) is about to taste Mimetic death just as—you got it—Anna, piloting a female robot, the Okusaer, for the first time (she wasn't so keen about being left at the altar) comes to the rescue, holding off the attack long enough for her and Goh's robots to combine and put the beast down in spectacular fashion. Next on the menu, Anna, of course, wants to become Goh's new co-pilot, to which he is understandably opposed; but business is business and she's a natural born top gun so it boils down to whether or not she can withstand the rigorous training, and moreover what Mom has to say, who seems ill surprised that her daughter is a total badass, even if she is a diminutive, pink haired babe. Much to Goh's chagrin, Anna doesn't just pass the tests but pretty much breaks every record in the process and so, as our preview volume came to a close, the plot had adequately thickened.

Perhaps the best thing about Goddanar though, other than the fact that it's one of the best looking TV series you'll ever see (great animation, a vivid palette and tremendous design abound) is what happens around the main plot. Like all the best series, there is much diversion in the midst; the maintenance crew (Goh and Anna's relationship and marriage were well kept secrets) are a chatty unhinged bunch full of side stories, and Kiriko seems to be a master manipulator. Fan service is also in full bloom and I might add seemingly even better than ADV's other squad-based mecha magnum opus, Gravion Zwei. When it's this good one can never get enough.

Dave Halverson



I think I'll take the fifth on this caption.

Godannar — Volume 1 — **9.5** Score

Amazing in every way, from the animation to story to the cast and supporting characters.

The age difference between Goh and Anna is a little, shall we say, wide.

Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** TV MA
Running Time: 125 minutes **Available:** October 4

Kiddy Grade

"Visually stunning and highly compelling, Kiddy Grade is definitely a series worth looking into this year"

--BPM Culture Magazine



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Volume 1 - The Peacekeepers
Volume 2 - Pieces of the Past

File Collection 2
6 Episodes - 150 Minutes
Volume 3 - Lies Beneath
Volume 4 - The Present Future

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--ANIME INSIDER MAGAZINE



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Volume 1 - Out of This World
Volume 2 - Academy Life

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Volume 3 - Captain Seina Yamada
Volume 4 - New Illusions



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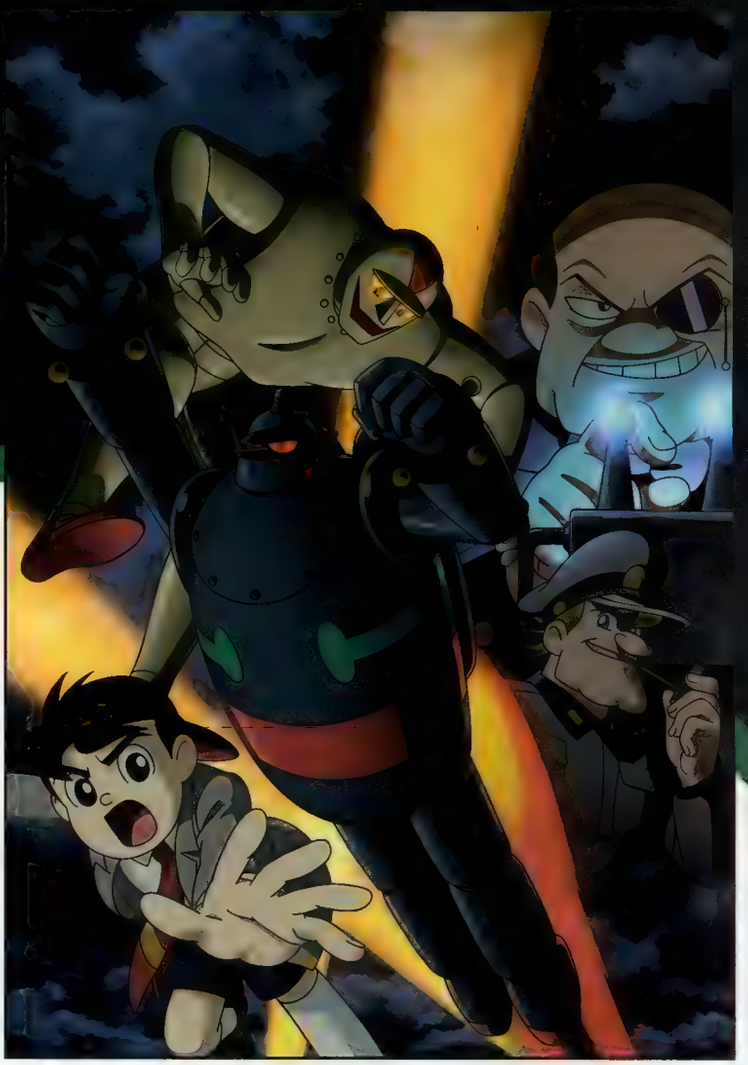
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Tetsujin 28

Bigger than big, stronger than strong, and better than ever

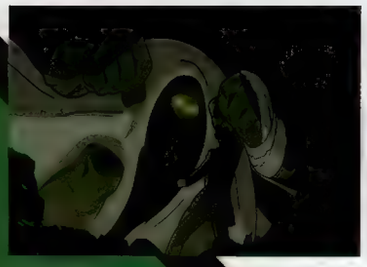
Renamed Gigantor when it came to the states back in 1963, Tetsujin 28 features the original cast (in a re-imagined story) in their proper Japanese namesake so don't expect Jimmy Sparks, Doctor Bob Brilliant, Inspector Ignatz Blooper, or everyone's favorite utility man Dick Strong. As much as I love Gigantor in all of its cheesy splendor (how did Cat's Meow get munitions onto all those penguins?) this is the series I've waited half a lifetime for. If you like Giant Robo (and who doesn't), Tetsujin 28 is absolute requisite viewing. Shedding its innocent veneer from the outset, Tetsujin's origins are actually rooted in pain: With Japan looking all but defeated in World War II, the military ordered genius scientist, Professor Kaneda, to leave his pregnant wife behind, and voyage to a top secret lab in the South seas to develop giant robots encased in giant missiles to fire upon the US (now that would have been something to see). Amidst the project which was plagued with failures (27 to be exact) news came over of a bombing raid that all but leveled Tokyo. Believing his wife and young son dead, Kaneda built Tetsujin 28 and gave it the name he and his wife chose for their son (Shotaro) to compensate for the loss and planned to raise 28 as a father would a child. Realizing the atrocity of his creation however, he sealed himself and his creation away, and ordered his protégé, Professor Shikishima (a.k.a. Bob Brilliant), to annihilate Tetsujin 28 should he ever be discovered.

> "If you like Giant Robo (and who doesn't), Tetsujin 28 is absolute requisite viewing."

Fast forward ten years and it is a time for economic recovery in Japan as they endeavor to fuel their economy by developing the world's first giant robots in a project headed by Shikishima who has also been caring for Kaneda's son (alive and well having escaped the devastation) Shotaro, now a boy detective who wears his socks way too high. Just as Shikishima is on the brink of awakening his giant robot (27) Tetsujin 28 mysteriously launches directly at Tokyo and ends up landing exactly where young Shotaro is shaking down some thugs. Moments later the two are united but it's not all plaid sport coats and remote controls just yet. 28 has already killed a man and no one knows for sure what he's been programmed for. Without giving too much away the entire first volume is pretty much a gem, introducing Dr. Franken, Black Ox and a few unexpected surprises. Presented in retro militaristic form with sparkling digital animation, Tetsujin 28 is a beautiful show that has all the making of a classic series.

Dave Halverson







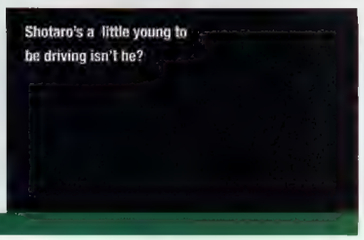
Tetsujin 28 9.5 Score

Volume 1

Nostalgia meets modern technique and sensibilities, with just the right dose of propoganda.

Hard to find fault with this one. I'm not crazy about the opening and Shotaro socks really bug me.

Released by: Geneon Entertainment **Rating:** 13 and up
Running Time: 115 minutes **Available:** September



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-PLAY magazine



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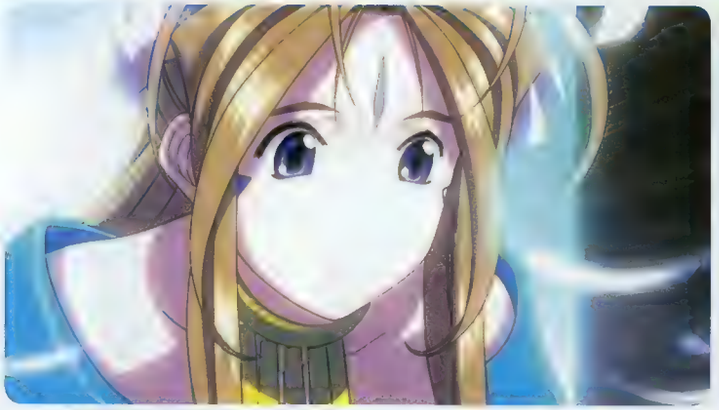
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AH! MY GODDESS

Sticky sweet...for now at least

When we're kids the ultimate form of exaggeration comes in the form of talking farm animals (rabbit, duck, rooster, pig, Tasmanian devil) but our imaginations don't have to die with our childhoods. That's why the Japanese created anime. Now we can grow up and watch shows about beautiful goddesses descending from heaven to cater to our every whim, which is exactly what happens to Keiichi Morisato, a freshman at Nekomi Technical Institute and loser extraordinaire. If you've seen the OVA or read the manga you already know where this is heading, but watching it unfold in full bloom and perfectly recreated is as special as it is sticky sweet.



Keiichi Morisato is five-foot-three, so broke he lives with the gear-heads from his university auto-club, his bike won't start, and he's been rejected by the most popular girl in school. When he asked her out she didn't just say no, she pretty much went for the jugular and blew him and his funky sport jacket out of the water. Yet still, somehow, Keiichi has remained an optimistic kind hearted person...exactly the criteria for divine intervention. As a result of his diligence in the wake of ultra-nerddom, he is chosen to receive a goddess, as in a drop-dead gorgeous teenage hotty from heaven who emerges through a mirror to grant him one wish; any wish. Now we all know any of us would go for unlimited wealth because with mansions, jets, cars, and assorted bobbles come all the women (or men) you can handle along with unlimited free time and so on, but this is a proper young Japanese teen and so he wishes for his goddess, Belldandy, to stay by his side forever (awww)... Not be his girlfriend and stay by his side, mind you...just stay by his side. Fool! His wish granted, the first order of business is getting kicked out of the auto-club (no girls allowed) so now we get to spend the remaining four episodes watching Keiichi get his life together while attached to a beautiful magical goddess from heaven. Okay, so maybe the talking farm animals are more exciting but things do get better... Beyond the core story, Keiichi's auto-club cronies steal the show and as the series progresses, a bounty of heaven sent hotness awaits along with the racing soul I so love about this rich, if not groundbreaking story. Dave Halverson

Ah! My Goddess — **9.0** Score

Volume 1 - Always and Forever

Great manga, great OVA, and now a great TV series.

It's on the light and innocent side out of the gate, but things will heat up soon enough.

Released by: Anime Works **Rating:** 13 and up
Running Time: 125 minutes **Available:** September



"...she pretty much went for the jugular and blew him and his funky sport jacket out of the water."





Keiichi's buddies bust in and bust him big time.

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Cowboy Bebop Remix

A Lotta 'Bop a Loop 'Bop a Whack Bang Boom



This is the story of five bounty hunters, thrown together to live on a ship and save the universe... for a price, of course. An ex-cop, a gambling vixen, a wiry fighter, a feral-like hacker, and a dog. *Yes, I said a dog.* He *was* a bounty at one point in episode 2. Wait, come to think of it, so was the gambler (episode 3)... and the hacker! You can get the blues watching their stories... and the jazz, and the rock and roll, and the funk... because demigoddess Yoko Kano puts a score together that finds something for everyone, kind of like the show's themes! Because there's a *Desperado*-like fugitive tale, an animal caper with *Game of Death* elements, a gambling flimflam, an eco-terrorist hit squad family, and mob revenge with some pretty deep history involved. And this is just the first volume— you ain't seen nothin' yet.

Since premiering in 1998 in Japan, the show constantly reveals details when you go back over them, and go over them some more of its 26 episodes. Bits and pieces of history begin to fall into place, but a few manage to fall under the couch too, leaving you to fill it in with your imagination, which isn't too hard. The show never goes so deep in its stories that it drowns in it, nor does it have the simplicity of a Saturday morning cartoon. It's got something for everyone... comedy, action, drama, revenge, true love, death, rebirth, horror, science fiction. No easy feat, to be sure, but somehow director Shinichiro Watanabe got the music, the stories, the look, and the characters so tight that there hasn't been anything like it, nor likely to be again. And with the new 5.1 sound (and a picture so sharp that you can cut yourself from looking at it), this benchmark of a series just got a heck of a lot more funky. The music is one of the best variety compilations ever, and you'd never know that they came from the same person, covering every major (and some minor) genres. If you haven't watched an episode after all this time, now's the time. For those that have, turn it up and let it fly, because this borderline-miscreant crew is back for one last thumpin' score. Jim Dewey

Cowboy Bebop Remix

Volume: 1

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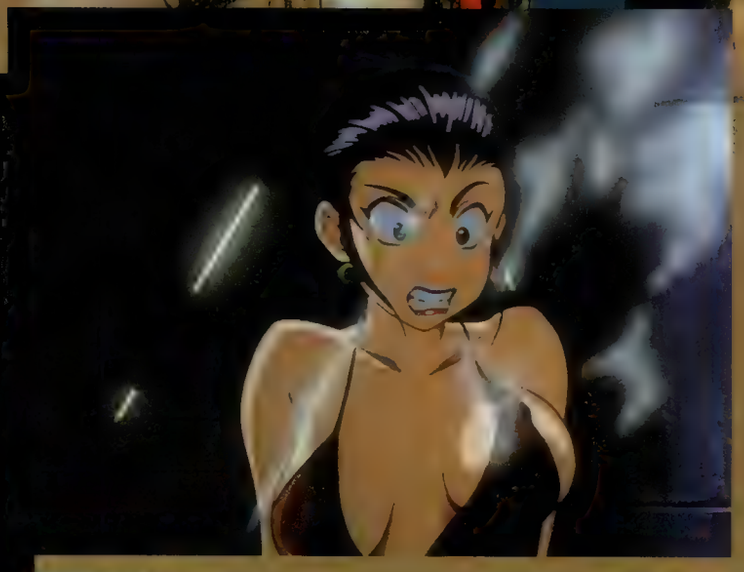
As if you need any more good reasons to get this series; by the time you finish this sentence.

Anime commentaries can get so boring! And Radical Edward is not here yet! No fair no fair no fair!

Released by: Bandai Entertainment **Rating:** 13 and up
Running Time: 125 minutes **Available:** Now

"If you haven't watched an episode after all this time, now's the time."









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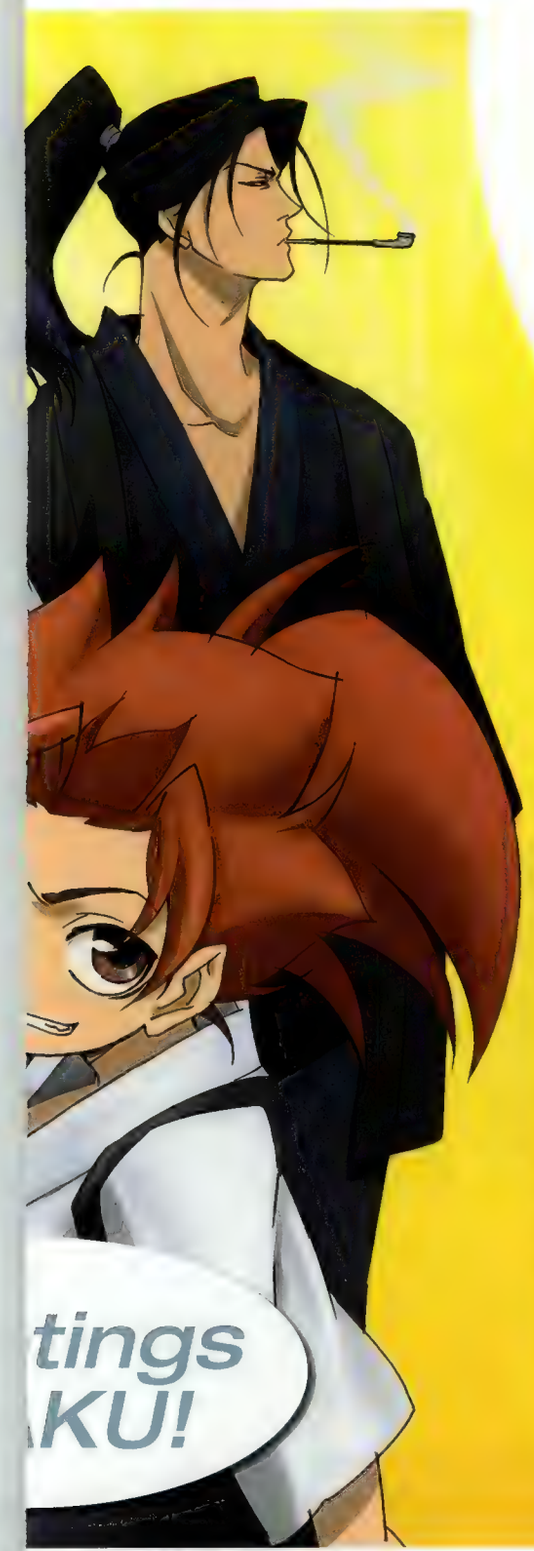


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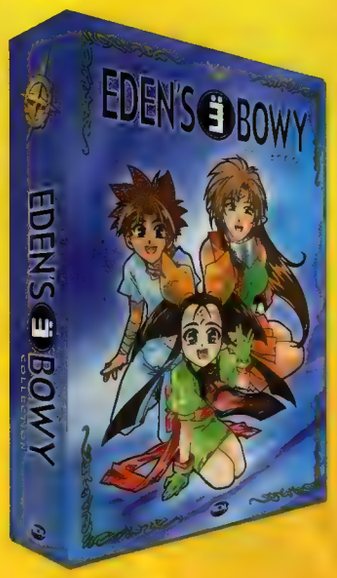




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Mythical Detective Loki Ragnarok

Volume 1 - "God & Detectives"

The tone never seems to get overtly dramatic, given its heady premise, and the yuks are well-staggered.

Loki's ability to recall his weapon seems... showy, given he's

8.5 Score

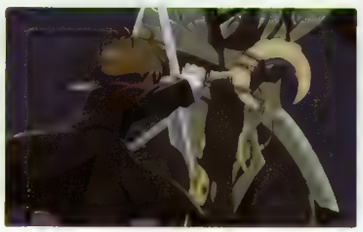
Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** TV-PG **Running Time:** 100 minutes **Available:** October 18

Norse Gods have always been some tough customers, either on the ethereal plane or here on Earth— from Hiemdall to Freya to other unpronounceable names right up through the big guy himself, Odin. So what is it exactly that mischievous Loki did to tick him off something fierce enough to be banished to Earth as a boy? As it is, Loki is running a detective agency on Earth now, and things are a little slow. It isn't until he meets curiosity-seeking Mayura, a dippy high schooler looking for a creepy old doll that got cat-napped, that that his past catches up to him and he finds that his otherworldly investigations seem to center around his old cohorts instigating them...Between the solid line work of the character designs and the competent animation, it certainly makes for enjoyable viewing. But the instillation of a cute little long-eared mascot and the fact that even the other gods are coming down to Earth as teens or younger as well leaves me scratching my head over the bigger mystery of what Loki did. Chalk it up to viewer demographics, I suppose. Nevertheless, despite some occasional spotty voice work, *Loki Ragnarok* will appeal to *Case Closed* fans, if for the genius-shrunk-to-a-kid factor— though more attention needs to be put on the *detective* aspect. I wonder if they had a god for that... Jim Dewey



"Loki Ragnarok will appeal to *Case Closed* fans..."







Ghost Stories

Volume 1

It's an equal-opportunity offender, and the jokes fly faster than Patrick Swayze on a bender!

Sometimes the humor gets a little thick on the celebrity references, alienating it from the Japanese locale.

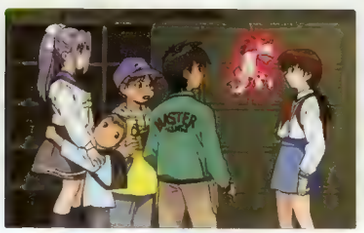
9.0 Score

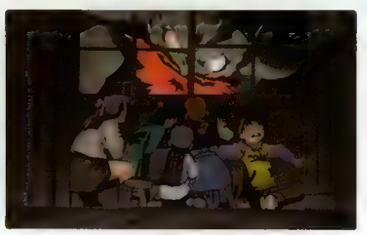
Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** TV-PG **Running Time:** 75 minutes **Available:** October 25

School sucks, we all know that. But does it have to be the clubhouse for wayward spirits? New student Satsuki's little brother brought their cat to class the first day, but it ran off into the old abandoned school next door. Her chauvinist neighbor Hajime, his dorky best friend Leo, and upperclass born-again Jesus freak Momoko (whose hat blew in to the building) all come along. They meet a big honkin' demon named Amanojaku, and end up defeating him using a spirit guidebook they find hidden away by Satsuki's mother years before. But, he ends up residing in the cat after his defeat. If Satsuki is ever going to get their beloved feline back to his normal state, they're going to have to defeat the rest of Amanojaku's buddies first.

Believe it or not, this series is a comedy with some horror elements, not the other way around. The American localization of the series is handled by many of the crew who worked on *Super Milk Chan*, so you know the pop culture references are going to flow like water, much like in episode two with the toilet demon (it's not that bad— really, heck the jokes about it are worse). Some of the best voice talent from the ADV stable deftly cranks out the humor, even if it goes lowbrow at times. The terror parts don't go above a PG level in scariness, but that would ultimately work against the humor. Well, how about that— made it through the review without a mention of *Ghostbusters*.Jim Dewey

"Believe it or not, this series is a comedy with some horror elements, not the other way around."






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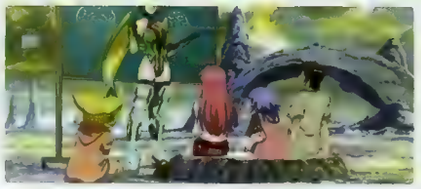
Yumeria

Volume 1 - "Enter the Dreamscape"

+ Tomokazu's not a complete wimp or chest-thumping warrior — he's portrayed as a believable good guy
- The enemy is rather boring, and the battles don't seem all that desperate. Needs to raise it up a few notches.

7.5 Score

Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** TV-14 **Running Time:** 100 minutes **Available:** Now





I wish I had dreams like Tomokazu. He dreams about fighting off monolithic enemies surrounded by beautiful young girls in winged skimpy outfits. Only one of them he somehow brought back from the dream world— a girl named Mone, which, incidentally, is the only word she can say. The other girls he knows from the real world, but they're only able to meet up with him when he sleeps or is rendered unconscious (usually by his lolita-complex fetishist teacher, always jealous that Tomokazu receives so much attention). In the dream world, all he has to do is touch the girls to activate their magical transformations, and acts as a sort of battery recharger for their weapons by holding them close. Some guys have all the luck.

Never being one so much for the bouncy-bouncy one guy/gaggle of girls stories unlike other people, I found *Yumeria* never seeming to exploit, as best illustrated in the sexy-yet-modest costumes. While some of the girls are formulaic, the younger ones (Mone and Neneko, the cat-hat wearing one) are adorable but refreshing in their characterizations, and Tomokazu is relatable. The animation is done rather well for a series, and the color throughout is vibrant without going overboard. The story, while funny in moments, is slight, but that's to be expected given it's a typical "meet the characters, one by one" setup, and will hopefully pick up in future volumes as Tomokazu dreams bigger.

Now if I could only stop dreaming about riding public transportation all the time...

Jim Dewey

"I found Yumeria never seeming to exploit, as best illustrated in the sexy-yet-modest costumes"



Like I said...some guys have all the luck...



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Princess Ai

Released by: TokyoPop and Bleeding Edge
www.begoths.com

What's better than an extra-dimensional alien in Tokyo co-created by Courtney Love? (Wait is that still a good thing?). An extra-dimensional alien in Tokyo co-created by Courtney Love in your house, of course.

play this



Cowboy Bebop

Since we're not getting Cowboy Bebop for PS2 stateside, it's time to dial up your local import shop and pull yourself away from Remix long enough to join Spike and the gang for some fairly decent BeBop style action and intrigue (albeit in Japanese). It's not a great game by any stretch of the imagination but it's okay, and it's Bebop.

watch this



Ghost in the Shell SAC Special Edition Box: Official Log 1

Released by: Bandai/Manga Entertainment
Rating: 13 and up **Now Playing:** Volume 1

Bandai and Manga are offering two very special ways to get into SAC 2nd Gig, with a Special Edition box containing Volume 1 in an art covered tin along with the stellar soundtrack (see last month's essentials) and the quintessential SAC collectible, Stand Alone Complex Official Log 1; a beautiful 148 page bound book filled with designs, interviews, creator profiles, the meaning behind episodes 01-19, an amzing DVD and much more.



Elfen Lied

Released by: ADV Films
Rating: TV MA **Now Playing:** Volume 3

Elfen Lied is on Volume 3 and continues to only get better and more compelling as the body count rises. One of the very best mature series of the year, if you're not already into it you have 3 DVDs to go buy right now.



MADLAX

Released by: ADV Films
Rating: TV 14 **Now Playing:** Volume 3

MADLAX is on Volume 4 and the journey to sanctuary for MADLAX and Margaret continues to twist and turn. This intense amalgam of action, drama and suspense from the creators of Noir is not to me missed.



Full Metal Panic Fumoffu

Released by: ADV Films
Rating: TV PG **Now Playing:** Volume 3

Just when you think Fumoffu couldn't get any crazier, Kaname and Sousuke have to go and help a pacifist rugby team. Sousuke and pacifism…yeah, right. Oh…and there's hot springs…hot, hot springs. This series is just too good.



Samurai Gun

Released by: ADV Films
Rating: TV MA **Now Playing:** Volume 2

Ah, finally Volume 2 of ADV's stylish Samurai Gun. The struggle continues as the Shogunate aren't even close to being defeated, in fact, the Samurai Guns are pretty much outgunned making this volume all the more captivating.



Grenadier

Released by: Anime Works
Rating: 13 and up **Now Playing:** Volume 2

Anime Works' second volume of Grenadier (another amazing title in their awesome '05 arsenal) has Rushuna taking on about the only thing she can't charm the pants off of: deadly female assassins. The character designs by the way... simply exquisite.

NOW READING

the wonderful world of manga

Ghost Hunt



Publisher: Del Rey **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Horror/Drama
Rating: 13 and older **Story:** Shiho Inada **Art:** Fuyumi Ono

If you like Ghost Stories, as in character developed—not overly sensational—ghost stories, Ghost Hunt is a great read; as close as you'll get to a novel in animated form as you're likely to get. Originating at a decrepit school building long scheduled for the wrecking ball, every time someone tries to tear it down strange events occur… events that draw Mai Taniyama and her friends to investigate. But rather than the usual token spirits, they find something much better…a deep compelling story! **Dave Halverson**

Read it if: You like a psychological thriller with a lot of manga-style color and wit.

Samurai Man



Publisher: Anime Works **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action/Drama
Rating: 16 and up **Story and Art:** Naoki Serizawa

Why is it every time someone finally gets the nerve to tell someone they like them that giant armored samurai rain down from the sky and start brawling? Ryouma has the worst luck, because he also ends up skewered like a shish-ka-bob protecting beautiful Katsumi. Thank goodness he's saved by the spirit of samurai King Shiyana, but only ends up having problems as they both can't get in sync when battling a disturbing turtle-man assassin, heavy on the "ass". **Jim Dewey**

Read it if: You dig spirit samurai emerging from heroes' chests without all the sticky mess.

Eiken



Publisher: Anime Works **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Comedy
Rating: 16 and up **Story and Art:** Seiji Matsuyama

Densuke never dreamt his desire to participate in extracurricular activities would land him in a club where he is literally surrounded, and often sandwiched in between, gargantuan breasts. As the only male member of the Eiken Club he'll be participating in assorted activities, most of which involve bikinis, as the one he really wants, Chiharu Shinonome (it was love at first accidental squeeze), grows more and more elusive. ULTRA fan service supreme all the way? Oh yeah, you bet…**Dave Halverson**

Read it if: Sorry, gotta say it… If you like boobs; lots and lots and lots of boobs. with a playful spirit.

Dramacon



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Comedy
Rating: 13 and older **Story and Art:** Svetlana Chmakova

If you actually recognize what this title means, you have experienced the life of a fan convention. Congratulations! …and sorry at the same time. Comic writer Christine's going to her first anime convention with her boyfriend to sell their book. Only he spends more time staring down cosplayers' tops than selling it. Add in a mysterious handsome cosplayer, hotel rooms, crushes, drunkenness, fast food and dense crowds, and you've got the 'con experience from one talented writer/artist in Svetlana Chmakova. **Jim Dewey**

Read it if: It's a convention in a book! And no luggage to tote around!

Sgt. Frog



Publisher: ADV Manga **Volume:** 2 **Genre:** Comedy
Rating: 13 and older **Story and Art:** Eiji Nonaka

…We find ourselves once again looking in on the exploits of Sgt. Frog, the best manga about space frogs taking over the world, ever. Momoka tries to get herself invited to a hot springs resort vacation by getting Fuyuki to win the vacation at a lottery, but things don't go as planned and Momoka and Koyuki have an all-out battle for the one extra ticket. Soon after, Keroro falls in love with Fuyuki's Children's Day decorations sent from his grand mother, and turns them into weapons (see; now how cool is that?). **Dave Halverson**

Read it if: You're into frog invasions gone completely awry.

Gacha Gacha



Publisher: Del Rey **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Comedy
Rating: 16 and up **Story and Art:** Hiroyuki Tamakoshi

When Kouhei, mysteriously transforms while on vacation in Hawaii from all-too-familiar gal pal to ultra pure on one side, and pretty much slutty (that would be the surprising part) on the other, it sends her bestest friend Kurara into a complete tail spin as he tries to help her keep her secret a secret while restraining his increasingly strong feelings to jump her alter ego's bones…If he only had the right stuff. Gacha Gacha has totally lived up to its billing.
Dave Halverson

Read it if: You don't mind being teased so bad that you want to jump into the pages and take matters into your

Lunar Legend Tsukihime

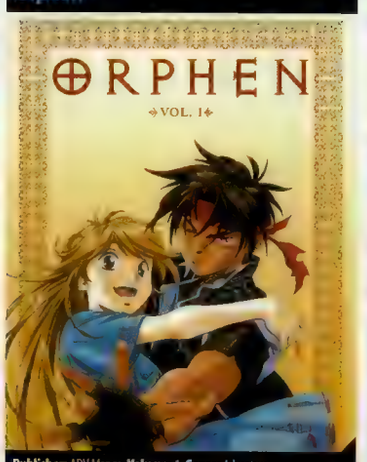


Publisher: DrMaster **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Horror **Rating:** 15 and up
Manga by: Saskishonen, Original Creators Type-Moon/Tsukihime Project

Someone needs to be more careful about who he dices into bite-sized chunks (17 to be exact). So Shiki was born cursed with the ability to see the threads of life and rejected by his now dead father; that's no reason to go Iron Chef on a beautiful blonde…If only she really were. When Shiki finally unleashes his rage, using the threads he sees as a diagram for his blade, the life he takes shows up the next day demanding an explanation. She is actually a powerful vampire and now she wants her pound of flesh. **Dave H**

Read it if: You want to experience one of the best original horror graphic novels ever produced…Oh, and see the

Orphen



Publisher: ADV Manga **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Adventure
Rating: 13 and up **Story by:** Yoshinobu Akita **Art:** Hajime Sawada

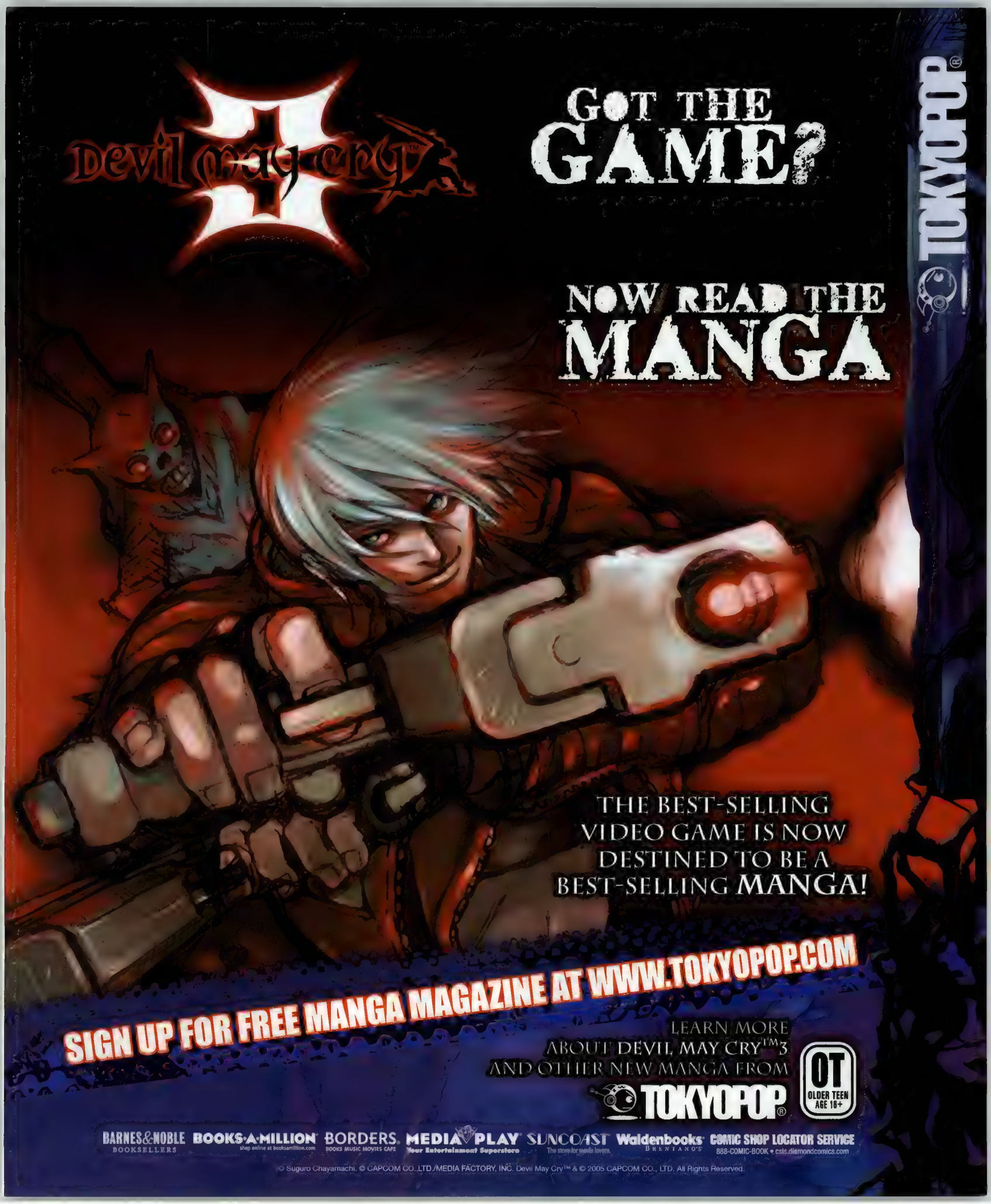
The trouble with Orphen the anime was that for such a great story (the cast being among the coolest threesomes ever assembled), the quality was all over the place, ranging from good to utter crap as the series changed producers more than most guys change their underwear; and likewise for the game. Not so for the manga, which is extremely well drawn and written and…not necessarily a mirror image of the anime, giving fans something new and newcomers something to search eBay for. **Dave Halverson**

Read it if: You like an older, cooler, darker Harry Potter who fled his version of Hogwarts in search of fortune and glory.

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Lights Out



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action/Drama
Rating: 13 and older **Story and Art:** Myung-Jin Lee

coolest thing about the flamboyant and oh-so-fun to read Lights Out is that it was Myung-Jin Lee's (Ragnarok) debut work presented 10-years later, warts and all. The man had the mad skills from book one. **Dave Halverson**



Lights Out is about Gun, a problem child (okay maybe that's putting it lightly) who at the request (okay begging) of his family decides to turn over a new leaf… So he transfers to a new High School, rents a room at the local co-ed dorm and begins life anew. It's there that rabble rousing is replaced with female arousing, but love, as they say, hurts. Trouble, of the female persuasion (scary ghost lady!—lovely landlord's granddaughter!) along with pretty much every other conceivable variety is still after our hero, Gun; as to whether or not he can beat it off with a stick remains to be seen. The

Read it if: You like gorgeous girls in skin tight leather on road bikes (a.k.a. heaven) and a lot of other really out-there teen angst

Kingdom Hearts



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Fantasy
Rating: All ages **Adapted:** Shiro Amano



When you wish upon a star…You'll end up in a kick-ass Square video game filled with Disney characters…At least if you're 14-year-old Sora, caught up in a freak storm on your island home and transported to a parallel world where Court Wizard Donald and Captain Goofy are on a mission to find their master, Mickey, and return him to his throne at Disney Castle. Learning of The Heartless—shadowy specters that feed of the darkness in peoples' hearts—the three join forces and, Keyblade in hand, set out to find Sora's friends and return Mickey to his rightful position. Like I needed to tell you that. **Dave Halverson**

Read it if: You, like everyone else that's ever touched a PS2 controller, simply can't get enough Kingdom Hearts.



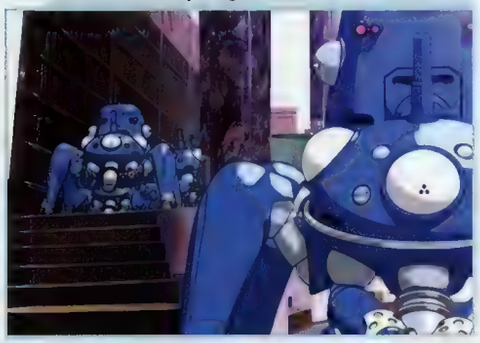
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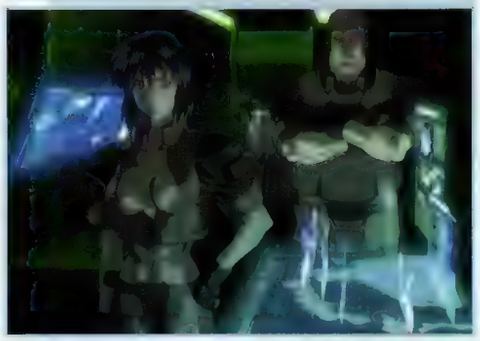
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** *bandai/manga ent.*
02	**Samurai 7** *funimation productions*
03	**Steamboy** *columbia tristar*
04	**Cowboy Bebop Remix** *bandai entertainment*
05	**Appleseed** *geneon entertainment*
06	**Area 88** *adv films*
07	**Mars Daybreak** *bandai entertainment*
08	**Gilgamesh** *adv films*
09	**Street Fighter Alpha Generations** *manga ent.*
10	**Samurai Champloo** *geneon entertainment*



Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** *bandai/manga ent.*
02	**Godannar** *adv films*
03	**Burst Angel vol. 4** *funimation productions*
04	**Tetsujin 28** *geneon entertainment*
05	**Cowboy Bebop Remix** *bandai entertainment*
06	**Samurai 7 vol. 2** *funimation productions*
07	**Gankutsuou** *geneon entertainment*
08	**Ghost Stories** *adv films*
09	**Grenadier vol. 2** *anime works*
10	**Full Metal Panic Fumoffu vol. 3** *adv films*



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Samurai Champloo
geneon entertainment

The deeper we go, the more Champloo delivers; always dripping with style and just the right amount of cool.

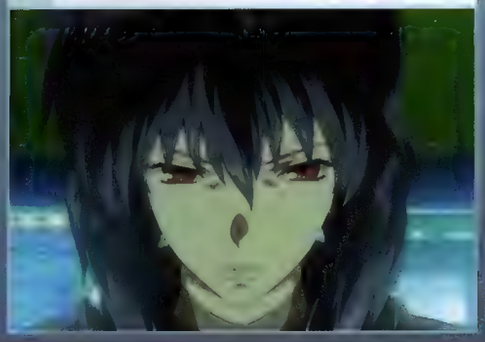


Steamboy
columbia tristar

The most impressive blending of CG and traditional animation ever put on screen.

Dave Halverson

01	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** *bandai/manga ent.*
02	**Goddanar** *adv films*
03	**Burst Angel vol. 3** *funimation productions*
04	**Tetsujin 28** *geneon entertainment*
05	**Grenadier** *anime works*



Jim Dewey

01	**Cowboy Bebop Remix** *bandai entertainment*
02	**Ghost Stories** *adv films*
03	**Gankutsuou** *geneon entertainment*
04	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** *bandai/manga ent.*
05	**Cromartie High School** *adv films*



Nelson Lui

01	**Goddanar** *adv films*
02	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** *bandai/manga ent.*
03	**Grenadier** *anime works*
04	**Full Metal Panic Fumoffu** *adv films*
05	**Daphne in the Brilliant Blue** *geneon entertainment*



Readers' Anime Top Five

01	**Samurai Champloo** *geneon entertainment*
02	**Burst Angel** *funimation productions*
03	**Gunslinger Girl** *funimation productions*
04	**Fullmetal Alchemist** *funimation productions*
05	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC** *manga entertainment*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**I Luv Halloween** *tokyopop manga*
02	**Gacha Gacha** *del rey*
03	**Lights Out** *tokyopop manga*
04	**Kingdom Hearts** *tokyopop manga*
05	**Lunar Legend Tsukihime** *drmaster*

Readers' Most Wanted

01	**Samurai 7** *funimation productions*
02	**One Piece** *toei*
03	**InuYasha** *viz media*
04	**Ghost Talker's Daydream** *geneon entertainment*
05	**Street Fight Alpha Generations** *manga ent.*

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BACK OF THE BOOK

11.05 MIKE GRIFFIN
PC EDITOR

The Revolution controller could be brilliant. Satoru Iwata told me so.

In the first few seconds, it wasn't easy to be drawn-in by the TV remote-style design. During the Iwata speech at the unveiling, watching that little montage of the people doing various things with the Revolution controller…that started to change my outlook. *Of course* that design will work, I thought. It's so straightforward. It's so confident and simple. *Of course* casual gamers can pick that up and have some fun with it, moving their bodies and seeing the pay-off right away on screen. It's like the ultimate couch potato controller. "Nintendo Revolution causes third heart attack. Congress considers ban. News at 11." But seriously, everyone knows how to operate a TV remote. And it involves the most negligible physical displacement to modify the playback of what you're watching. That's where the Revolution controller does a huge about face. When you take a universally familiar physical interface design like a common electronics remote, where everyone understands the basic mechanism of the object in their hands, and you modify it for the purpose of interaction (something beyond caveman-level memorization), and you get that interaction with motion sensitive control…that connection should come naturally for people, right?

Conceptually, the Revolution controller was becoming a little too diluted. Playing a fishing game with grandpa is cute and all, but how about some *real* next-gen gaming examples? Then Iwata started to talk about how the controller will dramatically improve first person shooter gameplay on a console. That was sort of an odd point to bring up at the Japanese unveiling. So everyone looks at the Revolution controller again to see what he's talking about. I super impose the image of a Wavebird controller over top, and begin to pontificate the perfection of the mouse and keyboard for FPS games…and then the truth of it strikes home like thunder: yeah, seriously, this Revolution controller will be great for first person shooters. I totally agree with you, Mr. Iwata. Steering with the stick add-on and looking and firing with the main motion-sensing remote *will* work, and it could be spectacular. You may have to sit a little closer to the screen—we'll see. So anyway, at this point he has every western player drooling and moaning aloud with visions of Metroid Prime 3 dancing in their heads. Even considering the success of that franchise, to think that Nintendo would heavily factor in the effectiveness of the Revolution controller with a first person shooter—just, wow. In the wake of the montage clip with the drumming, the party games, the sword slashing and the Mario jumping…a blatant reference to a popular western genre was rather compelling.

What else does it do? This is probably the most important part about the Revolution controller, and it's something that Iwata could only hint at. The Revolution controller instantly plants a seed in a developer's mind. This is not the same beanstalk seed that Microsoft or Sony will offer. And it certainly won't result in the same harvest. When a game designer thinks of Revolution now, he doesn't set out with the notion, "I wonder if the multi-cores can handle this action." Or, "Will our physics engine work with an SPE?" Those are complex questions with madly convoluted answers, but no, such concerns won't come to mind when a designer first thinks of a Revolution game concept. Those questions are far too linear, and far too conventional. The first thing he considers is the interaction with that controller: what he can do with it and what he can try to make the player feel, through it. By default, he is thinking about ways to physically involve the player—before the bits, the pixel shaders and the blooms. He's thinking about how to make a game for that controller, and how the idea he had for the other consoles should probably stay on those machines, because everyone else, he realizes, is also trying to conjure up a unique use for that Revolution controller.



"The Revolution controller instantly plants a seed in a developer's mind...And it certainly won't result in the same harvest."

That simple notion hits home because, by default, every Revolution player will have that controller. Just like the remote that came with your TV and DVD player. They weren't optional. So when the designer thinks of a game, he is absolutely 100% sure that a Nintendo Revolution player will have a wireless motion-sensing controller to use. His entire original Revolution game concept will constantly reference that fact, and the idea of player motion in virtually any genre, and how the interaction can be as subtle or as spirited as he aims to make it, comes to fore. Suddenly there's this whole other method to map out emotional content and channel it to the player, and it's surprisingly quantifiable when you're doing it physically, as opposed to exclusively through traditional control, presentation and narrative.

It's an intriguing proposition. Think of your personal favorite developer for a sec. Consider their past titles, the gameplay, the characters and the stories. Think of all that creative energy. Now imagine what he or she would come up with on Revolution, and how potentially liberating it may be for them to explore a facet of game design that most assuredly did not exist until now. And that is why we must love Nintendo and every Revolution they bring to gaming. Satoru Iwata did not have to tell me that.

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Elektra

The comic-book adaptation receives an extensive, unrated director's cut

Interview

Rob Bowman Director **Elektra**



The new cut... I thought it felt a bit edgier, not so candy coated. Maybe that was your original vision to begin with?
Rob Bowman: Thank you for saying so. Maybe the edge is that I removed some additional voice over dialogue. When you're making a movie for a group, for a theater full of people, it's a different means of telling a story than if you're making it for one person sitting at home, or a couple of people. If you're in the theater, you're trying to appeal to a mass audience, thousands, millions of people. You kind of have to do it to make sure everyone in the audience understands where we're going.

I've been a home-theater owner for 20 years. I just wanted it to be a bit more engaging, and I thought the story had to be as edgy as possible, because all of the mythology, the comic books about Elektra are extremely violent and rough, she's angry and all this kind of stuff. I had to first deliver a PG-13 movie. The theatrical version was literally 12 frames from an R. And I said, "I don't believe this, I watch television where people get shot and blood hits and all that stuff... I just don't see why I'm that close to an R." So I had to soften the movie. I put in everything I could that I had taken out to put the edge back into it. Kirigi cutting off MacCabe's head is important to me as a storyteller, because I want the audience to know what kind of person is coming after Elektra. Also, by pulling out some of the dialogue, you have to work a little harder, participate more in the story telling because I'm not making it absolutely clear where I'm going. It becomes more experimental, more impressionistic almost. That's also why I added some stronger color to it. The color also spoke to the tone of the movie. So I did everything I could to what you describe as put the edge back into it...

The studio always has what they want, but here you are on your own, you say you're a home theater buff, you know specifically what you want to do. It's cool to have the opportunity of DVD.
Really cool. It's a wonderful gift from the studio because I honestly didn't even ask. I literally called my editor and said, "I want to do a director's cut, we're just gonna do it." I know the home DVD market is an important business for the studio, and I thought, hey, I'll do it, and if they want do a director's cut, I'll say I'm half way through. To the extent that I did it, all the additional color timing, adding visual effects, seeing Jennifer [Gardner, who plays Elektra] die in one of her kimagories. It speaks to the kind of things she thinks about, which is pretty horrible. It puts a bit more highs and lows into it... I spent 14 weeks on this director's cut squeaking it out.

Wow, that's pretty intensive for a DVD project.
[laughs] Yeah, and I did it for free. But I loved it. I said, "If I'm gonna do this, I want to do it really sweet." And they just backed away... It's not like you have total liberty to do whatever you want, but what I focused on was telling the story the way I originally wanted, designing it for home-theater enthusiasts, remixing the sound.

You've been heavily involved, really from the beginning of your career, from Star Trek to X Files to Reign of Fire to this— that sci-fi, fantasy realm. Are you drawn to the material, or did you just kind of fall into it?
Very wise of you. You know, my favorite movies, some of them are Saturday afternoon stuff, *Jason and the Argonauts*. But I also love *Lawrence of Arabia, Great Expectations*, all kinds of films. You know with *Star Trek*, which was the first left turn I made, I became a free-lance director, and it's nothing more than that was the show that would hire me. I was 26 years old, I had *21 Jump Street*, a couple of *Stingrays* under my belt. Not much. *Star Trek* said hey, we like your stuff, we want you to shoot for us. That became a home for me. It wasn't like I was a trekkie. So what had happened, as I was working my way through television, there was a movie script called *Airborne*. It was kids and rollerblades and whatnot. I was trying to get into the movies, and you just take what comes your way. I finished that, and I just thought, my tastes are really darker, I want to see if I can go back to what I really love, which is scary, dark, shadowy stuff. So saw the commercials for the *X Files*, and I thought, that's what I want to do. It's cool, it's interesting, certainly influenced by growing up watching Spielberg doing *Close Encounters*. I got on the *X Files*, and I was just in love with that show.

> "I said, 'If I'm gonna do this, I want to do it really sweet.'"

Absolutely. And Chris Carter made you a staple.

Yeah, I said, "Just keep me shooting this show, because I love it." And here I am again, doing sci-fi. You know, one of the stories I told a while back, I said I just didn't want to do the monster episodes. Because they always show up in some cheap plastic suit, they just look stupid. So I said "Chris, if you could please guide the monster episodes away from me, and just give me the conspiracy stuff, the real compelling intrigue stuff." So I finished the *X Files*, the movie, and I get this script called *Reign of Fire*. I had this weird thing as a kid, I liked dragons... In movie lore, a dragon is a supreme predator. Just the most dangerous creature in movies. You know, I got these little figurines in my house, have had them around for years. I don't really go around telling people about that [laughs]. But I get this script, and there's this notion of soldiers and dragons and castles and tanks, that's an interesting recipe. So I say, what do I do? I don't categorize myself as the sci-fi director, I don't like monsters, I specifically ask not to direct *X Files* monster shows, and hear I go off and direct a dragon movie. So every time I say I'm not a sci fi director, I have nothing to back it up.

Yeah, what are you gonna do.

[laughs] And then I go direct *Elektra*, people can jump around and stuff. I don't know what to tell you. I can't get away from it. **play**

Kingdom of Heaven

Starring: Orlando Bloom, Eva Green, Jeremy Irons, Liam Neeson
Directed by: Ridley Scott
Released By: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment
Rated: R







After seeing it again on DVD I cannot for the life of me figure out why *Kingdom of Heaven* failed at the box office. The cast is spectacular down the line, the story, among the most fascinating turning points in the history of the Middle East, if not the world, and the spectacle, by the modern master of the epic, Ridley Scott, brings a tear to your eye just for seeing it, let alone the score and wonderful pacing of the story. It's not quite *Gladiator* (what is?) but it's of the same pedigree and just as much the spectacle. Nevertheless the DVD is packed with among the best extras I have ever seen including an entire disc of enlightening documentaries to an amazing production "grid" and so much more. Dave Halverson

Movie: A- **Extras:** B+

PREVIEW

Star Wars Episode III Revenge of the Sith

Starring: Ewan McGregor, Hayden Christensen, Natalie Portman
Director: George Lucas
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

The end of a 30-year-long journey is quickly coming to an end for Star Wars geeks everywhere (including myself!) and RotS is slated to close the door on the world's most beloved sci-fi series. Yes, George Lucas' writing was a little wooden, yes there are some gaping plot holes in the massive arc of the 6-film saga…but it's Star Wars for crying out loud. Anakin Skywalker's first chilling breath as the infamous Darth Vader is something fans won't forget anytime soon, and the DVD Extras plan to walk fans through the processes that made RotS so visually fantastic with over 6 glorious hours of all things behind-the-scenes. Taking viewers on tours through costume, fight choreography, set design, makeup and more, there are so many interesting things happening that it often feels as if you're right in the middle of the chaos. Something slightly amusing (and dare I say unsettling)





was watching George plop down a first draft of *Sith's* script…*after* people had been working on sets and costumes for a long while. He even jokes, "I better get working on that script" when he visits the set builders to note their progress. Um, George? Aren't you supposed to have a first draft banged out *before* they build that huge intergalactic opera house? Ashley Esqueda

The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl

Starring: Taylor Lautner, Taylor Dooley, Cayden Boyd, George Lopez
Director: Robert Rodriguez
Released By: Dimension Home Video
Rated: PG-13

As brilliant and savvy a filmmaker as Robert Rodriguez is, I suppose he's earned the right to create a movie by essentially elaborating on his young son's whimsy (as seen in the curious extras) even though I believe that they may have taken young Racer a bit too literally at times. Getting kids to blurt out fantastic ideas after all is pretty much universal; the problem is (depending on whom you talk to) that much of the time they will involve such things as rivers of chocolate and banana rafts—essentially the part of the film that made me wince. Otherwise, for the most part, like everything Rodriguez does, *Sharkboy and Lavagirl* is fueled with enough of his patented pizzazz to keep anyone firmly glued, 3D glasses at the ready. If nothing else—and the movie is highly entertaining fluff—the 3D effect on a hi-definition screen is as deep as that syrupy river. Dave Halverson

Movie: B **Extras:** D



Family Guy Presents Stewie Griffin: The Untold Story

Starring: Seth MacFarlane, Alex Borstein, Seth Green
Director: Various
Released By: 20th Century Fox Home Video
Rated: NR

Celebrate the return of the irreverent Family Guy to television with this even more-off-color-than usual Family Guy Presents Stewie Griffin: The Untold Story. Celebrate, that is, if you're a fan. This caustic comedy pays no sensitivity to the politically correct—every one and every thing is a target, with little heart to go along with the ramming. I love it for its absurdity, but with the unhinged humor comes scenes that do fall flat on their face. In this straight-to-video extended episode, Stewie takes off for a road trip to find his real father, going cross country for a chance in scenery. You know what to expect: loose plot, one random joke popping out after another. Brady Flechter

Movie: B+ **Extras:** B



The Longest Yard

Starring: Adam Sandler, Chris Rock, Burt Reynolds Nelly
Director: Peter Segal
Released By: MTV/Paramount
Rated: PG-13



I was and remain embarrassed for every last actor (even Nelly) in this steaming turd of a remake… and this from someone that really liked *Little Nicky*. Reynolds is given such crap to say and act it's a wonder he didn't die of humiliation on the set, and literally everything else is as bad or worse. I can't imagine how anyone could even make a movie this cliché and awful, let alone get wide distribution to spread the disease. What's wrong with America? This made three times what *Kingdom of Heaven* did!? There is nothing even remotely good here, just the utter trashing of a good film. The extras are plenty deep but they just made me more angry. That they actually thought they were making a good film hurts my brain. Sandler, Chris Rock, Burt Reynolds, Nelly… Dave Halverson

Movie: F **Extras:** Who cares?

Going Ape with the Gorillaz

From deep within the reaches of their top-secret Kong Studios, an encrypted communication arrived at the doorstep of Play. After checking to make sure that it was not booby-trapped, our brave scribe opened the message to reveal ruminations from the members of one of the universes most cryptic and influential collections of musicians around—The Gorillaz. Members Noodle (guitar), 2D (vocals), Russel (hip-hop lyricist) and Murdoc (bass) shared their thoughts with Play, in a rare interview filled with international espionage and religious intrigue.

By Lucas Mast and Dave Halverson

Play: Do you create with your animated counterparts specifically in mind, or just create the music you'd be making regardless and bring in the (animated) band afterwards?
Noodle: Music is the key foundation of every good group. If the music doesn't work then everything else falls apart. Gorillaz are an animated band, but like most musicians we're not conscious of ourselves when we record. The music is far bigger, far greater than the state of the people who make it.

2D: I'm not sure that Chubby Checker would agree on that one. I think if he wasn't aware of his…size, then the music would be totally different.

Murdoc: Yeah, Noodle, I'm not sure that Ozzy Osbourne would agree with that either. I think most musicians are completely aware of themselves when they record. I mean he's like the Lord of Darkness! If he doesn't make a black-rock Satanic corker, then his whole game is over.

Noodle: Ok, well, maybe because Gorillaz present themselves so uniquely, we may seem to be the exception to the rule. The Gorillaz music is made without the preconception of videos or artwork in mind. We simply make the songs sound right, let them breathe and come alive.

How did the opportunities to work with iTunes come about?
Murdoc: Hey…I..err.. I don't really get involved with all the paperwork issues. But you know, people just keep phoning us up and suggesting ways we could work together. iTunes seems like a great label so we got together with them. The stitching is fantastic.

Noodle: I have been downloading music from the Internet since Napster was in nappies. It was always obvious that this was the way music would progress. So I feel we should be guiding the future into the present maybe…a little faster. When the opportunity came up to work with iTunes...we took it. It's one of our finest collaborations.

2D: Since I got my iPod I can actually move around my room again.

Murdoc: Yeah, but all the music you listen to's crap. You should have dumped all those CD's straight in the bin.

Can you offer any insight into other members that might be joining Gorillaz, either as guests or regular members?
Murdoc: Listen, no-one else is joining this band. And no-one leaves except in a box. There's people we might collaborate with, but at the moment I'd say we've really used up the cream of the crop on 'Demon Days'.

Noodle: Hmm…I'm thinking that for the next album we should grow our own collaborators, in a tube. Like, Collaborator clones.

Murdoc: Despite the fact that I despise 2D like the plague, this band is made up of these four original members, and they're irreplaceable. I hate it when bands lose pivotal members and then continue under the same name. It's just a big con.

Play: The new Kidrobot vinyls are amazing, exuding a level of quality in line with your videos and DVD. Will we see more branding this time around? The characters seem primed for Adult Swim, and more over, video games. If so are they making sure to stay in the approvals loop to assure the quality is there?
Noodle: Nothing ever leaves the Gorillaz HQ without getting approval from us. Nothing. Not an advert, not a CD, not a single poster. That's why Gorillaz come across so well. We don't delegate or

"Despite the fact that I despise 2D like the plague, this band is made up of these four original members, and they're irreplaceable."

Murdoc



outsource our art.

2D: I'd like to see a game of us. It'd be amazing to see what we would look like if we were digitised, like…animated version of ourselves.

Russel: You still don't get it, D, do you?

Noodle: Whatever we do would in that area, we'd definitely have to oversee.

Play: How much additional time does the animation take preparation-wise for a newrelease? Essentially nailing two mediums at once the timing must be interesting.
Noodle: When Jamie Hewlett and Pete Candeland shoot our videos, the time from initial shots to the finished product is normally about 3 months. So much of the detail has to be hand drawn, plus there's the CG elements, then the after-effects, the lighting then the rendering. Each of our videos is like making…well, a mini-movie.

Murdoc: Well, for Feelgood Inc vid, I just turned up a little fuzzy, took my top off, danced around with my bass looking great and then left. It only took my 2 hours. But obviously being a pro I work faster than people like Jamie and Passion Pictures.

Noodle: Passion Pictures are the people that put together our videos with Jamie and Peter. And Murdoc doesn't know what he's talking about.

Who would the Gorillaz like to work with (either collaboration or tour with?)
Murdoc: I think it would be great to team up with Lemmy from Motorhead.

Russel: I don't know, er…someone like Steve Reich would be interesting. He was experimenting with piano and rhythm loops for a long time before samplers were even invented. Maybe Jim Thirwell, Alec Empire or the Aphex Twin, if you're looking at something fierce and noisy. I like Fourtet's work. And maybe someone with a cinematic quality like John Barry or Ennio Morricone would be a cool collaboration. We look to those people for influence a lot anyway so it would be great to do a remix or something with someone who didn't really use re-mixing as their main tool, you know. That way you run the risk of ending up with something truly original.



Have you created substantially more for animated content for Demon Days?
Noodle: There have been more acceptance speeches. And also the quality of the animation in our videos has certainly increased since the last album, because of the advances in technology. And sometimes our imaginations can run away with us…

You guys into or inspired by anime? If so, what are you fans of? What about games?
Noodle: *Spirited Away* by the Japanese animation studio Studio Ghibli, is one of my favorites. You can see an influence of their work on the Feelgood Inc. video. Also I've been a big fan of the film *Akira*. Games-wise I think it's Halo and Resident Evil that really do it for me.

Russel: Our base Kong Studios became infested with zombies during our absence, so when Noodle returned from Japan, all her computer game practice really paid off in terms of clearing the corridors of the…walking undead.

Noodle: It took about six months to empty it of all the carcasses. For a while it was a real life version of 'Resident Evil'.

Play: With Demon Days a definitive sound has emerged the like that we seldom hear these days. The new material with Danger Mouse, and MF Doom (as much as we loved the debut) seems more nuanced and is incredibly diverse. What's your process like? Do you sit down and just write or is it a more free form creative process? Do you guys spend a lot of time together experimenting?
Noodle: All music is an experiment; there is no definite repeatable formula that guarantees a good outcome. But the usual process begins with me sketching out tunes, melodies and ideas using just a guitar and a four-track machine. We then go into the studio and having put the rough idea into Pro-Tools, we begin adding a rhythm or maybe some other instruments... bass lines...keyboard lines. From there it's a process of recording, editing, re-recording, scrapping ideas, bringing in other musicians etc. And then one day you wake up and your song is…fully grown.

Russel: Dangermouse and Noodle worked very well together in terms of being able to bounce ideas between the two of them. One will suggest a pattern or texture and the other will instinctively anticipate whether that sound is going to be…relevant to that song. And also whether that song is going to be relevant to that album.

Murdoc: Well… I think it's my bass-lines that really make the album work.

Play: Have you considered Holographic concerts for the future? Seems like a no-brainer.
Murdoc: A no-brainer!? Great! Bring it on! All that thinking makes my head hurt.

Noodle: We do have a world tour planned. It's gonna be really, really exciting. It's taking time to put it together as the technology is quite groundbreaking but as soon as we have the details we'll let you know.

Murdoc: But you can be guaranteed it's gonna knock your socks off. There's gonna be full-on rock, fantastic visuals, me on bass, and a whole jaw-dropping spectacular stage show. Unmissable.

2D: You sound like P.T. Barnum.

Play: The Beach Boys meets Gorillaz 'Don't Get Lost in Here' running into 'Demon Days' is practically euphoric. It's like a ray of sunshine at disc's end and p-much a departure from the rest of your music. Is there anything to it, or is it just that: a little ray of sunshine?
Noodle: That 'little ray of sunshine' goes a long way. Without that, the rest of the record makes no sense. It balances the whole album, and it's also the album's pay-off. The rest of the record is a description of the darkness, and of the volatile times that surround us. The track 'Demon Days' is the….antidote. Without it the rest of the album collapses into hopeless misery. That track leaves you looking optimistically to the future, which can only be a good thing.



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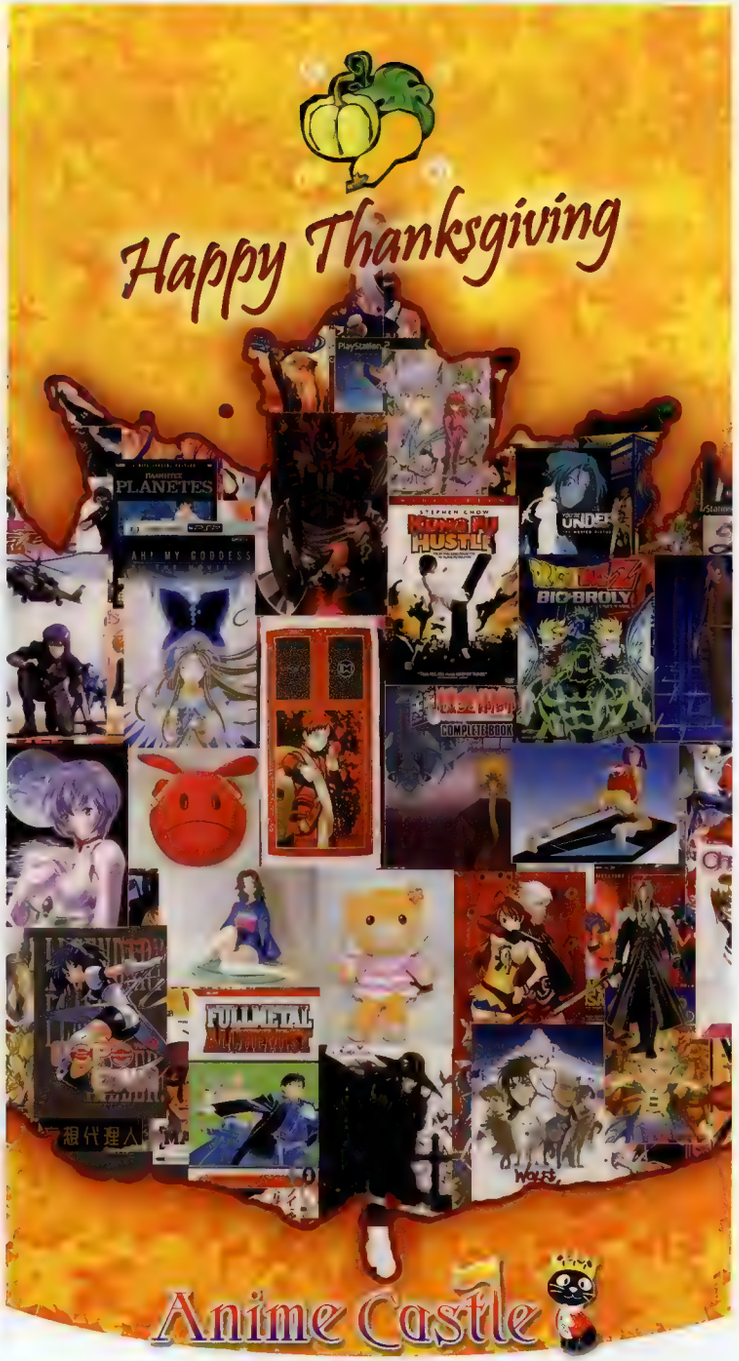
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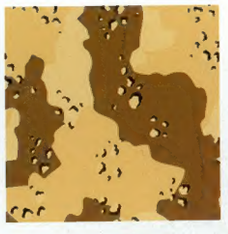
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